

P13

OMAN CHARTS
PATH TO GREEN
FINANCE
LEADERSHIP



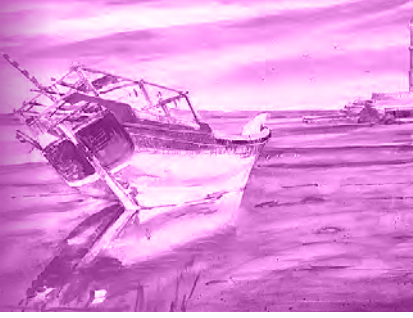
P12

BARSHAM TAKES
QATAR TO SEMIS
WITH THREE
PENALTY SAVES



P20

LANTERN-LIT EXHIBIT IS
A JOURNEY TO ABSTRACT
REALMS AND BOLD
VISIONS



MUSCAT

SECOND SEMESTER IN
SCHOOL STARTS TODAY

Students and educational staff will start their second semester of the current academic year 2023-2024 following the end of the mid-year vacation. The second semester of the academic year 2023-2024 will end on July 11. Year-end examinations at the public and private schools applying the Ministry of Education's calendar and the General Education Diploma (GED) exams will be from June 2 to July 11. Thirteen new schools have already been completed in the governorates of Muscat, Dhofar, South Al Batinah, North Al Batinah and South Al Sharqiyah and will be submitted to the Ministry of Education during this semester.

BIDIYA

INT'L CINEMA, DESERT
FESTIVAL FROM FEB 7

Bidiya in North Al Sharqiyah Governorate will host the International Cinema and Desert Festival from February 7 to 10. Organisers proudly announced that the festival, set in the open air of Bidiya Public Park, is the first of its kind in Oman. Mohammed Al Rasbi, the festival director, explained the motivation behind this unique event, stating, "We chose to launch this extravaganza to explore the beauty of Omani deserts, unveiling its customs and traditions of living." The festival has garnered active involvement, with 18 countries submitting around 65 films. **SEE P2**

BELFAST

NATIONALIST FIRST
MINISTER OF N IRELAND

Northern Ireland's parliament appointed an Irish nationalist as First Minister for the first time on Saturday, a historic milestone in a state established a century ago to ensure the dominance of pro-British unionists. Michelle O'Neill's appointment, the delayed result of a watershed 2022 election, is the latest sign of the rise of a Sinn Fein party in the British region that has said its ultimate dream of a united Ireland is "within touching distance." The appointment came as Sinn Fein's pro-British rival, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), formally ended a two-year boycott of the power-sharing government after this week striking a deal with the British government. **SEE P7**

OPINION

P8



Dr Hamed al Sinawi

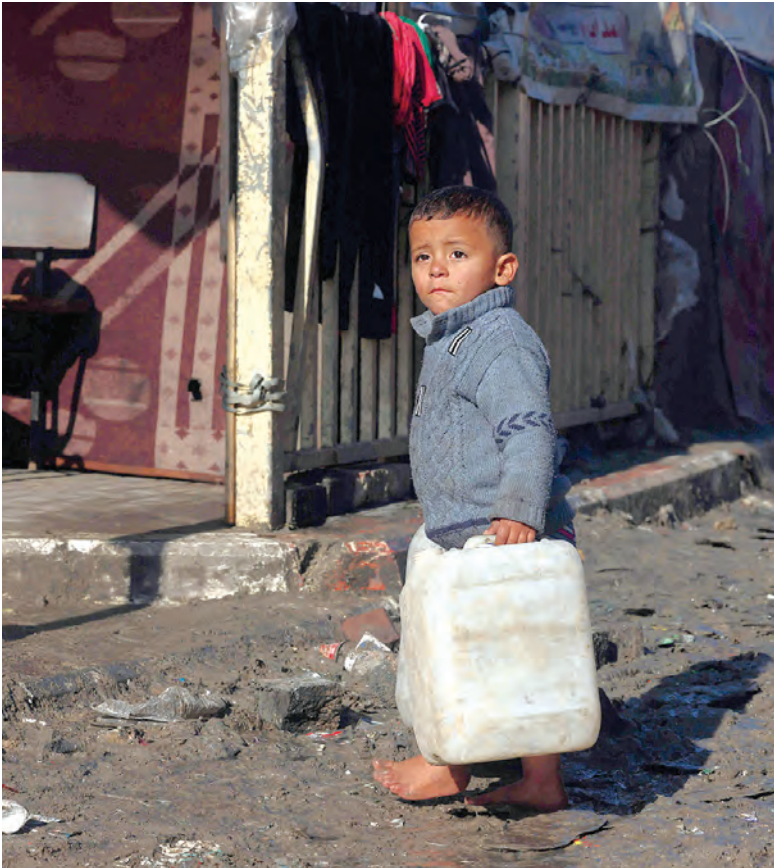
How to be mentally strong ?

P9



Ray Petersen

Once upon a time, man ruled...



A young boy carries empty jerricans in Rafah on Saturday, as fighting continues between Israel and Hamas. — AFP

Oman shows solidarity with Iraq and Syria after US airstrikes

MUSCAT: Sayyid Badr bin Hamad al Busaidy, Foreign Minister, made a phone call to Dr Fuad Hussein, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iraq, on Saturday. During the telephonic conversation, Sayyid Badr expressed Oman's solidarity with Iraq, its security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, with reference to the American attacks on sites in Iraq.

The two ministers underscored the importance of preventing the expansion of the circle of conflict in the region. They also underlined the priority of stopping the ongoing Israeli war in the Gaza Strip and continuing international efforts to reach a complete and permanent ceasefire and pave the way for achieving a just and comprehensive peace with the participation of all parties.

Sayyid Badr also spoke to Dr Faisal Mekdad, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Syria.

During the telephonic conversation, Sayyid Badr expressed the Sultanate of Oman's solidarity with Syria, its security, sovereignty and territorial integrity, following the American attacks on sites in Syria.

The two ministers underscored the importance of resorting to serious dialogue involving all parties, containing escalation and conflicts and the withdrawal of foreign forces from the Syrian territories. They also underlined the priority of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict and ending the Israeli occupation from all occupied Palestinian and Arab lands to realise permanent, comprehensive and just peace in the region.

The United States launched overnight air strikes in Iraq and Syria, drawing condemnation from both governments, and promised more to come in retaliation for a deadly attack on US troops

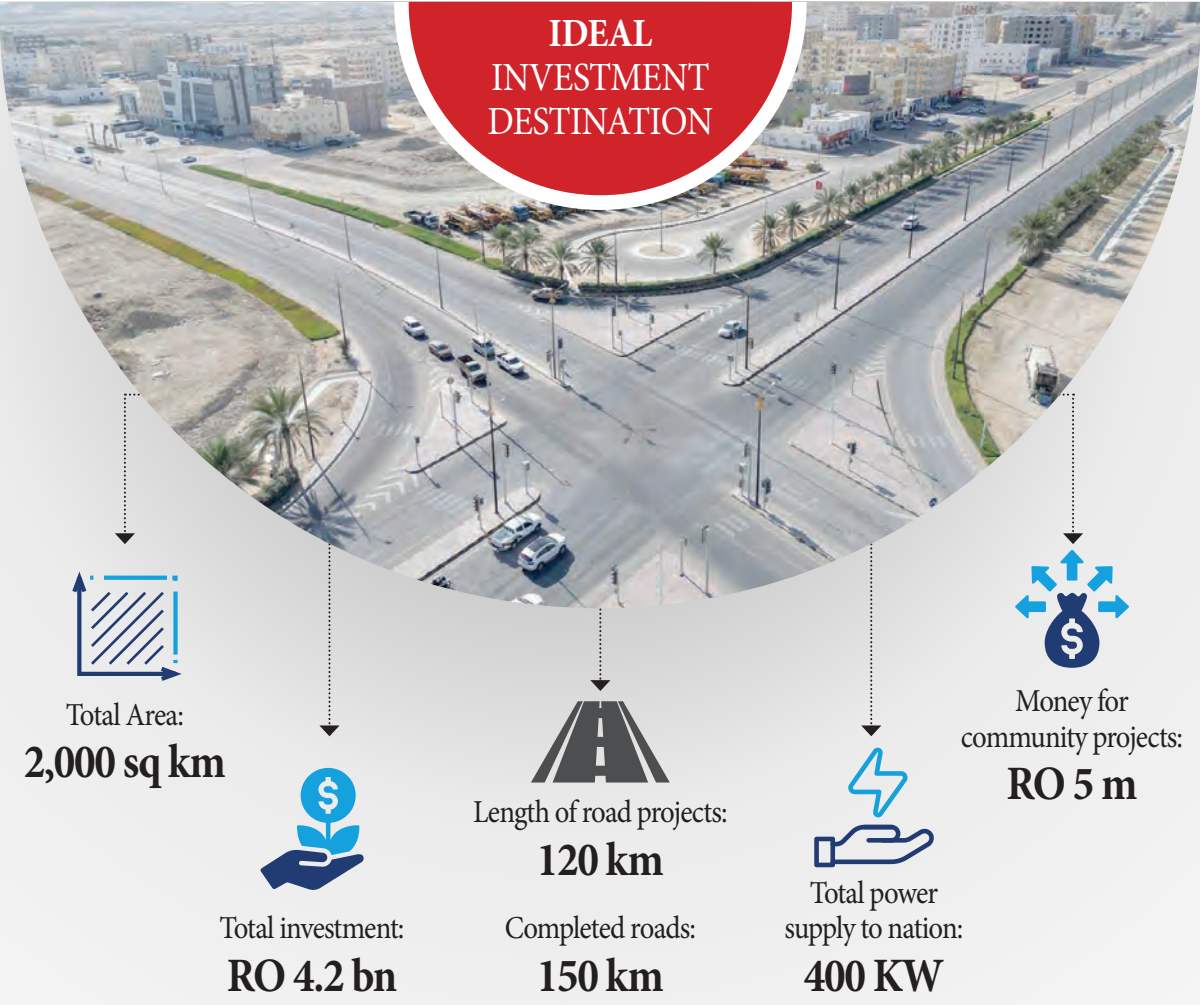
The United States launched overnight air strikes in Iraq and Syria, drawing condemnation from both governments, and promised more to come in retaliation for a deadly attack on US troops. The United States blamed Sunday's drone attack on a US base in Jordan on forces backed by Iran, but did not strike inside Iranian territory, with both Washington and Tehran seemingly keen to avoid all-out war.

Both Damascus and Baghdad joined Tehran in accusing Washington of undermining the stability of the whole region.

Russia's foreign ministry accused Washington of "sowing chaos and destruction" in the Middle East.

SEE ASLO P6

SEZAD develops 40% of Duqm Zone masterplan



DUQM: The administration of the Special Economic Zone in Duqm (SEZAD) said that work is underway to develop 40 per cent of the masterplan for the SEZAD through the localisation and establishment of many strategic projects, namely the Port of Duqm, the dry dock, the fishing port, the Duqm Refinery, and other basic projects such as roads, stations for electricity, water and gas and projects for clean energy and green hydrogen.

SEZAD is one of the largest special economic zones in the Middle East and North Africa. It was established in 2011 and extends over an area of 2,000

square kilometres. It enjoys features that make it one of the main investment zones at the regional and global levels. SEZAD receives interest from many international companies that find in Duqm a unique location for their investments. The zone is distinguished by its ability to embrace various projects, whether in the industrial sector or other sectors such as tourism, trade, logistics services, and real estate development, in addition to its ability to provide the spaces that investors need to build their projects of all kinds.

Eng Abdullah bin Salim al Hakamani, Director of the Technical Affairs Department in the SEZAD, said, "The cumulative volume of government and private investment in the zone has reached about RO 4.2 billion in the SEZAD infrastructure and in other economic projects." He pointed out that there is a turnout and demand for investment in the zone designated for heavy industries coinciding with the operation of the Duqm Refinery project, which forms a nucleus for other downstream industries by converting crude oil into downstream derivatives such as diesel, naphtha, gas, methane, and others.

TURN TO P3



FOOD SECURITY WEEK LAUNCHED AT DOHA EXPO

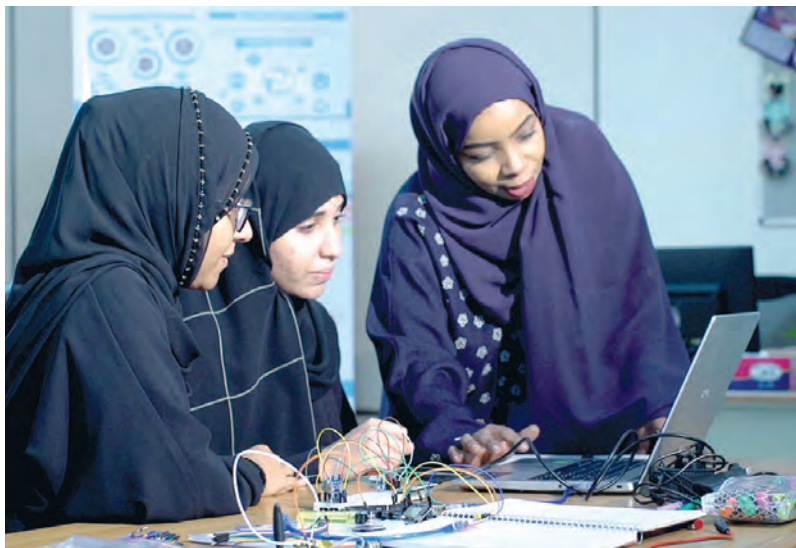
The Investment and Food Security Week in the Sultanate of Oman began under the title 'Green Desert, Better Environment' at the Sultanate of Oman's pavilion at the International Horticultural Expo 2023 in Doha on Saturday. **REPORT ON P2**



UTAS welcomes 5,014 students for 2023-2024

KHASAB: The University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) has welcomed 5,014 enrolled students for the second semester of the 2023-2024 academic year across its 11 branches. Among these students, 2,434 are males, and 2,580 are females. Notably, the Musandam Governorate branch has marked its first academic semester with 146 students.

The university will organise an orientation week from February 4 to 8, designed to introduce new students to the university's facilities, academic programmes, regulations and laws. During this week, students will undergo placement tests in English, mathematics and computer science for the foundational



The university has organised an orientation week to introduce new students to the university's facilities, academic programmes, regulations, and laws.

year. Orientation activities include registration procedures, email account setup, financial allocations, student awareness,

understanding of the academic system, major exploration and registration processes. Valuable advice for academic success will

Musandam branch excels with 146 enrolments for first academic semester

also be provided.

Dr Said bin Hamad al Rubai, the university president, commended the newly accepted students, encouraging them to excel and benefit from the experienced faculty and staff. He emphasised the importance of dedication, goal-striving, skill development, ethical commitment and positive representation of the university in local and international arenas.

Dr Al Rubai affirmed the university's commitment to Oman

Vision 2040.

Deans of the university branches extended a warm welcome to the new students, stressing the importance of embracing responsibility, seeking knowledge, acquiring new skills and developing their personalities to align with the demands of the job market.

Regarding the start of the academic year, Dr Ahmed bin Said al Shuhri, Assistant to the President at the Musandam branch, expressed his joy in receiving the new batch of students. He highlighted the university's efforts to create a robust scientific environment, equip students with various scientific and knowledge specialties, and develop necessary skills across different fields.

Dr Al Shuhri discussed the Musandam branch's preparations for approximately 150 students, including the recruitment of administrative and academic staff, setup of facilities and laboratories, provision of equipment, and development of plans, programmes and curricula. He emphasised the collaborative efforts of the university staff to ensure the timely completion of the branch's preparations.

The Musandam branch will offer several academic specialties and programmes tailored to meet the requirements of the job market, including Economics and Business Administration, Information Technology, and Educational Studies.

Tahayem Winter Season receives 300,000 visitors



JAALAN BANI BU ALI: As many as 300,000 people have so far visited the Tahayem Winter Season, organised by South Al Sharqiyah Governorate in collaboration with public and private establishments, in the Wilayat of Jaalan Bani Bu Ali.

The activities of the first edition of Tahayem Winter Season are taking place in 18 entertainment venues with 41 activities and programmes spanning the fields of heritage, entertainment, tourism, culture and sports.

The event saw multiple and varied activities including children's

programmes such as interactive artistic and entertainment shows, competitions and juggling shows. There are also special events for women to allow them an opportunity to enjoy the events and activities.

The activities also included poetry evenings and folk songs that saw the participation of a number of poets from the Sultanate of Oman and the other GCC countries. The event also saw a number of performances by folklore groups, theatre and cartoon characters and interactive events with the public. — ONA

Food security week launched at Doha expo

DOHA: The Investment and Food Security Week in the Sultanate of Oman began under the title 'Green Desert, Better Environment' at the Sultanate of Oman's pavilion at the International Horticultural Expo 2023, on Saturday.

Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI), confirmed that the Sultanate of Oman's participation in the International Horticultural Expo 2023 aims to introduce investors in the sisterly State of Qatar and the world's countries to investment opportunities in the agricultural sector and food security in the Sultanate of Oman.

The Investment and Food Security Week in the Sultanate of Oman will bring about positive results to the private sector, Al



Rawas said, adding that the role of the OCCI, undertaken by the Food Security Committee which functions in tandem with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources, to provide opportunities for citizens and investors.

Khalid bin Salim al Zuhaimi, Commissioner-General of the Sultanate of Oman's pavilion at the International Horticultural

Expo 2023, said that the Expo is gaining importance as a unique event that highlights issues of agriculture, horticulture and sustainability. It also displays the latest technologies and innovations in the field of sustainable agriculture, provision of food and natural resources, and encourages the exchange of knowledge and experiences between participating countries.

The Sultanate of Oman's participation in this important global event comes within the framework of the government's interest in the food security sector which is in line with the priorities of the Oman Vision 2040 which aims to achieve agricultural sustainability, food security, and promote rural development in the Sultanate of Oman, he added. — ONA

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Omani citizens travelling to UK can now apply for ETA

VINOD NAIR
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Oman citizens travelling to the UK can apply for Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) from today, which will replace the current system of applying for a visa.

The ETA can be applied for those travelling to the UK on or after February 22, 2024. The same rule applies to nationals of Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Omanis can get an ETA instead of a visa if they are coming to the UK for up to six months for tourism, visiting family and friends, business or short-term study, coming to the UK for up to three months on the Creative Worker visa concession, coming to the UK for up to 1 month for a Permitted Paid Engagement transiting through the UK.

Eligible individuals will be able to apply for an ETA online, either using the 'UK ETA app' or by searching for 'Apply for an ETA to come to the UK' on the gov.uk website. It costs £10 to apply and everyone travelling needs to get an ETA,

including babies and children. It is possible to apply for other people. Meanwhile, it takes three working days to get the ETA. Occasionally, it may take longer than three working days and one can travel to the UK while waiting for a decision.

The applicants will get an e-mail confirming the ETA. The ETA lasts for two years and you can travel to the UK as many times as you want during that time. According to official sources, the ETA scheme is being introduced as part of reforms to streamline and digitalise the UK's border and legal migration system whilst enhancing security. It will help improve UK border security by allowing the government to make the necessary security checks on travellers before they arrive in the UK.

Those applying for an ETA will provide their biographic, biometric and contact details, and answer a short set of suitability questions. This will increase the government's knowledge about those seeking to come to the UK and prevent the arrival of those who present a threat.

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Bidiya to host international cinema, desert festival from February 7

KHALID AL BALUSHI
@khalid_albalushi94

Bidiya in Al Sharqiyah North Governorate will host the International Cinema and Desert Festival from February 7 to 10. Organisers proudly announced that the festival, set in the open air of Bidiya Public Park, is the first of its kind in the Sultanate of Oman.

Mohammed al Rasbi, the festival director, explained the motivation behind this unique event, stating, “We chose to launch this extravaganza to explore the beauty of Omani deserts, unveiling its customs and traditions of living.”

The festival has garnered active involvement, with 18 countries submitting around 65 films. Notably, the submissions include 13 international documentary films, 12 Omani documentary films, and six international narrative films. Omani film-makers have made a substantial contribution, presenting 34 narrative films, most of which were produced



Organisers of international cinema, desert festival addressing the press conference

in 2023, indicating a promising outlook for Omani cinema.

Out of the submissions, 24 films were carefully selected, comprising seven international and 11 Omani documentary films, along with five international and one Omani narrative film.

Shaikh Rashid al Maslahi, the first deputy of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Oman, announced the Chamber’s

prize for the best film promoting sustainable development in the economic and tourism sectors of Al Sharqiyah North, with a value of RO 4,500.

Dr Hamid al Amri revealed the ‘Ain’ platform’s prize, sponsored by the Ministry of Information, amounting to RO 1,000, in addition to the festival awards with a total value of RO 3,000.

The festival aimed to attract proficient artists as guests and jury members, fostering collaboration between Omani photographers, producers, and international counterparts. It also sought to encourage youth and startups to enter the field of cinema, with the ultimate goal of achieving recognition and awards at regional and global levels.

Accompanying the festival are workshops that commenced in December, covering various aspects of film production such as screenplay writing, filming techniques, participation methods, and directing. Participants successfully produced five films during the Cinema and Desert Festival workshops.

The festival features various programmes, including a desert tour for guests and participants to explore Oman’s tourist and economic attractions, promoting the ‘Make Your Film in Oman’ initiative. Additionally, there will be cinema seminars and dialogues with festival guests.

Oman marks World Cancer Day today

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman marks World Cancer Day which falls on February 4 each year.

On this occasion, the Sultan Qaboos Comprehensive Cancer Care and Research Centre, said that it is moving ahead with the provision of quality medical services to cancer patients through its six treatment programmes.

In less than three years, the Centre managed to assume a leading place among specialist centres in the region and the whole world obtaining international accreditation in recognition of the quality health services it provides and the application of the best international practices in clinical service and patient safety and the competence of medical and administrative staff.

The Centre received 1,145 cases of breast cancer within a year, which is the most common type of cancer among women in the Sultanate of Oman.



The Breast Cancer Programme offers genetic counselling and testing to all newly diagnosed breast cancer patients.

The Centre plans to advance its scientific achievements relying on highly experienced staff, modern technological capabilities. The Centre’s vision goes beyond treating the patients to improving their quality of life as well as educating them and raising their awareness of cancer and providing psychological, rehabilitative and counselling services to them. — ONA

SEZAD develops 40 per cent of Duqm Zone masterplan

FROM PAGE 1

He explained that the total length of the roads currently being implemented in the zone is about 120 kilometres, in addition to about 150 kilometres that were implemented during the last period, which varied between main, secondary and service roads.

He added that the zone has been connected to the national electricity grid that supplies the entire Sultanate of Oman with a capacity of 400 KW, accommodating all mega projects. This constitutes a fundamental incentive for investors wishing to invest in the zone, especially large projects whose operations require high electrical energy and a water station with a capacity of 36,000 cubic metres per day.

He further said that another electricity generation is also established for the Duqm Refinery and Ras Markaz tank project with a capacity of 326 megawatts, in addition to the presence of a gas station that accommodates 25 million cubic metres of gas, which was linked to the Saih Nahidah station via 220 km long pipelines, which in turn constitutes another

incentive to encourage investors of large projects. All these features make SEZAD among the best investment destinations.

He stated that the zone carried out many works related to expanding the green area, afforestation operations, and infrastructure for recreational projects, in addition to establishing a public park. He explained that the completion rate of afforestation projects in the first phase in the zone reached about 100 per cent.

Al Hakamani affirmed that the SEZAD was interested in implementing entertainment projects that contribute to attracting visitors and residents in the zone, including a multi-use entertainment commercial project that will be established near the tourist area, and the establishment of a Friday market in the village of Dhahr in the Wilayat of Duqm.

He explained that about RO 5 million have been allocated for these projects.

He pointed that the zone has allocated 10 per cent of the purchases of projects and businesses that take place in the SEZAD to small and medium enterprises. — ONA

OMAN, INDIA MUSIC FUSION MARKS FRIENDLY RELATIONS

KABEER YOUSUF
@kabeeryousef

A unique fusion music ensemble of both Oman and India marked the existing friendly bilateral relations between the two countries on January 26, Indian Republic day, at the Indian Embassy premises marking yet another milestone between the two countries.

Titled ‘A unique Jugalbandi’, Omani band Scales Ensemble played Indian patriotic song ‘Vande Mataram’ and well-known danseuse Aishwarya performed ‘Odissi’ dance to the tunes in perfect rhythm and precision.

The event was held at the National Day Reception on the evening of January 28 to mark the 75th Republic Day of India, by Amit Narang, Ambassador of India at the Embassy of India in Muscat. Qais bin Mohammed al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), graced the occasion as the chief guest.

Khalid bin Hashil al Muselhi, Under-Secretary for Administrative and Financial Affairs, Foreign Ministry; Pankaj Khimji, Adviser for External Trade and International Cooperation at the Ministry of Commerce, Industry



Omani band Scales Ensemble played ‘A unique Jugalbandi’, to mark the Indian Republic Day

and Investment Promotion; Faisal bin Abdullah al Rawas, Chairman of Oman Chamber of Commerce and Industry (OCCI); Members of State Council and Majlis AshShura; senior government officials; Ambassadors resident in Muscat, as well as prominent members of the Omani and Indian community attended the reception.

The chief guest along with Sayyid Nasr al Busaidy and Amit Narang unveiled a replica of the joint commemorative postage stamp released during the State Visit of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik

to India in December 2023.

The festive atmosphere was elevated by a diverse array of Indian delicacies, offering guests a gastronomic journey through the rich culinary heritage of India. Additionally ‘Selfie with India’ corners, featuring life-size exhibits provided attendees with the opportunity to capture memorable moments against the backdrop of India’s cultural and scientific landmarks.

Scales Ensemble is a captivating musical ensemble based in Oman, aimed at harmonising western

classical notes with Arabic musical instruments and comprises of six highly skilled Omani musicians. The band is one of its kind, both in terms of the diversity of musical instruments and the quality of instrumental music performed. Among the instruments featured are the violin, qanun, and various oriental percussion instruments which includes a unique mix of flute, cello, and viola, contributing a Western texture that enables the group to perform instrumental music in both classical and Western styles.



Plans afoot to improve flight network in Duqm

DUQM: The Regional Airports Unit of ‘Oman Airports’, in cooperation with ‘Handling Transmission’ and all parties and partners, was able to achieve remarkable progress in promoting economic growth and sustainable development in the Duqm Special Economic Zone.

Since its opening 5 years ago, Duqm Airport has been an integral part of Oman Airports’ strategy to enhance infrastructure and logistics services in the region, in close cooperation with the Oman Airports Commercial Operations Unit, which is responsible for marketing and business development.

Shaikh Hilal bin Hamad al Mujali, Director of Duqm Airport at Oman Airports Company, said: “The continued growth in the number of passengers and flights witnessed by Duqm has led to an increase in the number of passengers from 12,663 arrivals and 11,706 departures in 2020 to 33,348 arrivals and 31,514



Shaikh Hilal bin Hamad al Mujali, Director, Duqm Airport

departures in 2023, noting that the statistics reflect the efforts made to enhance air traffic and facilitate access to the region, which helps attract investments and stimulate tourism in the Wilayat of Duqm.”

He stressed that there are plans to develop Duqm Airport in line with industrial growth in the region, as these plans include expanding facilities and improving services to keep pace with the expected



Oman Airports is working to expand the network of flights to and from Duqm airport

increase in passenger and freight traffic, explaining that these improvements will contribute to making Duqm Airport a major air transport centre and a gateway for trade and tourism in the region.

He pointed out that Oman Airports is working to expand the network of flights to and from the airport to include more local and international destinations, indicating that increasing air connectivity will enhance business opportunities and facilitate trade and cultural exchange, especially with the increasing movement of businessmen, investors and tourists.

He stressed that Oman Airports is committed to working alongside the Duqm Special Economic Zone and other stakeholders to ensure the continued success and prosperity of the airport, thus contributing to the progress of the entire region. — ONA

Rock Garden: A geological marvel and tourist oasis



The rock formations consist of fragile deposits of limestone formed in the modern era

DUQM: The Rock Garden located in the centre of the Wilayat of Duqm, the Special Economic Zone in Duqm (SEZAD), constitutes one of the tourist attractions that attract tourists and visitors to learn about the hidden components of this garden.

The garden is one of the most important geological sites in Oman and one of the most prominent natural treasures of Duqm. The garden, which has an area of about 6 square kilometres, includes unique rock formations lined up in the form of sandstone and limestone statues, formed by wind, water, ice, and other natural elements over millions of years.

The rock formations consist of fragile deposits of limestone that formed in the modern era, approximately 40 million years ago, and are covered by a harder layer. The processes of erosion by wind and water have contributed to sculpting these rocks in the form of a group of symmetry and natural sculptures.

Eng Abdullah bin Salim al Hakamani, Director of the



ENG ABDULLAH BIN SALIM AL HAKAMANI
DIRECTOR, TECHNICAL AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT, SEZAD



Technical Affairs Department, SEZAD, explains that they are working hard to protect this

unique natural component, as the site has been fenced with a wire fence and gates have been placed for visitors and tourists to enter as well as public parking lots, in addition to surveillance cameras to ensure the safety of the site from tampering.

He pointed out that a study is currently underway to add some facilities to the garden while creating corridors and highlighting the site’s features more clearly.

He added that in the first phase, a study will be conducted to appoint a consultant specialised in lighting and development works in a way that suits the nature of the site.

He said that the project will contribute to adding an aesthetic touch to the site and will attract many visitors, tourists and enthusiasts who would like to enjoy the natural places of the rock garden.

He concluded that the garden witnessed the organisation of many events by the SEZAD, including meetings with officials and visitors to the zone and other events. — ONA

A HAVEN OF CULTURE, GROWTH IN AL WUSTA GOVERNORATE

MAHOUT: Nestled in Al Wusta Governorate, the Wilayat of Mahout is a region of diverse natural beauty, boasting picturesque landscapes such as the ‘Bar Al Hikman,’ often referred to as the ‘Maldives of Oman.’

This region is home to numerous islands, including the historically significant Mahout Island, Ibb Island and Maawal Island, each contributing to the area’s unique charm.

Mahout’s landscape is adorned with mangrove trees on islands and beaches, while Ghaf trees thrive in desert areas and valleys. The discovery of a meteorite crater, estimated to be around 60 million years old, adds to the region’s geological intrigue. Rich in oil, minerals and marine resources like shrimp, Mahout stands as an economic powerhouse.

Omani craftsmanship flourishes in Mahout, with artisans producing traditional products such as textiles, wicker and leather. Livestock, including camels, takes centre stage in various festivals, featuring camel racing and competitions throughout the year.

Shaikh Humaid bin Dhahir al Bathari, Governor of Mahout, highlighted the governorate’s access to government services and ongoing development projects.

These projects encompass internal roads, lighting, slaughterhouses, gardens and parks, enhancing the



SHAIKH HUMAID BIN DHAHIR AL BATHARI
WALI OF MAHOUT

Ongoing development projects include internal roads, lighting, slaughterhouses, gardens and parks, enhancing the overall infrastructure



overall infrastructure. Notable among the upcoming developments is the fishing port in the Al Khalouf area, a crucial initiative set to benefit fishermen and boost the fishing sector. Additionally, the construction of the new Mahout Hospital is in progress.

The governor emphasised the transformative impact of the Special Economic Zone at Duqm on Al Wusta Governorate. This significant addition has revitalised economic activities across various fields in Mahout. — ONA





DEADLY STRIKES HIT RAFAH AHEAD OF GAZA TRUCE PUSH

GAZA: Deadly strikes were reported early on Saturday in the overcrowded Gaza border town of Rafah -- dubbed a "pressure cooker of despair" by the UN -- as international mediators readied a new push to seal a tentative truce deal.

Hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians have fled south to Rafah, with the former city of 200,000 now housing more than half of Gaza's two million-plus population.

The United Nations' humanitarian agency OCHA said it was deeply concerned about the escalation of hostilities in nearby Khan Yunis, which have pushed more and more people south in recent days.

"Most are living in makeshift structures, tents or out in the open," OCHA spokesman Jens Laerke said during a briefing in Geneva.

"Rafah is a pressure cooker of despair, and we fear for what comes next."

A journalist in the city heard powerful explosions shortly after midnight on Saturday, with the health ministry later reporting 14 people killed in two strikes there.

The ministry said more than 100 people in total were killed across the territory overnight.

Abdulkarim Misbah, one of the many people seeking refuge in Rafah, said he had first left his home in the northern Jabalia refugee camp for Khan Yunis, only to be uprooted again.

"We escaped last week from death in Khan Yunis, without bringing anything with us. We didn't find a place to stay. We slept on the streets the first two nights. The women and children slept in a mosque," the 32-year-old father said.



A young boy carries empty jerrycans in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. – AFP



People check the damage following Israeli bombardment in Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. – AFP

"My four children are shivering from the cold. They feel sick and unwell all the time," he said.

Winter storms and torrential rain lashed Gaza on Friday, with some people wearing hazmat suits left over from the Covid pandemic as protection against the harsh weather.

The war in Gaza was sparked by unprecedented October 7 attack on Israel.

In response, Israel launched a withering offensive that has killed more than 27,000 people in the Gaza Strip, mostly women and children, according to the health ministry in the territory.

Hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians have fled south to Rafah, with the former city of 200,000 now housing more than half of Gaza's two million-plus population.

The UN children's agency UNICEF said on Friday that an estimated 17,000 children in Gaza had been left unaccompanied or separated from their parents due to the war.

"Each one has a heartbreaking story of loss and grief," said spokesman Jonathan Crick.

Nearly four months of fighting have devastated the coastal strip, while an Israeli siege has resulted in dire shortages of food, water, fuel and medicines.

Image analysis released on Friday by the UN's satellite centre UNITAR based on footage collected on January 6 and 7 showed that "approximately 30

UK'S Cameron says he raised Palestinian state

BEIRUT: British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said he told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "start talking about the things a Palestinian state can be rather than the things it can't be", reiterating British support for a two-state solution.

The Gaza war has put renewed focus on a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, still seen by many countries including the United States as the path to peace even though the negotiating process has been moribund for years. In an interview with Lebanese broadcaster LBCI, Cameron said part of British policy is to say there will be a time when Britain would look to recognise a Palestinian state, including at the United Nations.

"That can't be at the start of the process. The process needs to get going. But it doesn't have to be at the end of the process," he said.

Netanyahu has voiced opposition to Palestinian sovereignty, saying he will not compromise on full Israeli security control west of Jordan and that this stands contrary to a Palestinian state.

Cameron, speaking during a visit to Lebanon as part of a regional tour, said Netanyahu had

"not ruled out comprehensively a two-state solution".

"My message to him was start talking about the things that a Palestinian state could be rather than the things it can't be. So that's what we should be working towards," he said.

Cameron last month said Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip must be given "the political perspective of a credible route to a Palestinian state and a new future" and this should be irreversible.

The Gaza war was triggered by Palestinian fighters who stormed across the border fence into Israel on Oct. 7.

Since then, Gaza health authorities say more than 27,000 Palestinians have been confirmed killed.

Mediators are waiting for a response from Hamas to a proposal drafted last week with Israeli and US spy chiefs and passed on by Egypt and Qatar, for the war's first extended ceasefire.

"It does seem there is a prospect of a potential pause in the fighting. It could be some days off, it could be some weeks off. I am hopeful," Cameron said in a separate interview with the Lebanese newspaper Annahar. — Reuters



Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri (R) talks with British Foreign Secretary David Cameron during their meeting in Beirut. – AFP file photo

Israel presses on last two refugee cities, targeting civilians

GAZA: Israeli air strikes killed 18 Palestinians in Rafah and Deir Al-Balah, Gaza health officials said on Saturday, in the last two Gaza Strip cities where troops had not been deployed, adding to residents' fears Israel would expand its ground operation.

Health officials said an Israeli air strike on a house in Rafah, where more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million residents are now homeless, killed 14 people including women and children.

The Israeli military did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Israel's Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said forces would now press on to Rafah on Gaza's southern edge.

Tens of thousands have arrived in Rafah in recent days, carrying belongings in their arms and pulling children on carts, since Israeli forces last week launched one of their biggest assaults of the war to capture nearby Khan Yunis, the main southern city.

"The place turned black, I couldn't see what's in front of me. It was all dust and dirt. I was touching my surroundings, I was looking for my mobile to use the flashlight to look for



A woman reacts as she salvages belongings from the rubble of a destroyed house following Israeli bombardment in Rafah. – AFP

my children, where are they? I found them under the rubble," said Ahmed Bassam Al-Jamal, whose son was killed.

"I cried for help and people came. I got out Yamen, the first one, he was the only one I can see, the rest were still under the rubble. They pulled out Yamen, Eileen and Sila and they pulled out their mother (all alive). We could not find Bassam, we were looking for him, but he was buried, we could not save them, I swear we couldn't," Jamal said, as he bade farewell to his dead son at the hospital.

In the central Gaza Strip city of Deir Al-Balah, the second major concentration of displaced people, medics said four people were killed in an air strike on a house earlier on Saturday.

In nearby Khan Yunis, residents said the army blew up a residential district near the city centre.

The Gaza health ministry said heavy Israeli bombardment around the city's two main hospitals continued to undermine healthcare systems and endanger the lives of staff, patients, and displaced people who have taken shelter there.

On Friday, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society said four people were killed by Israeli gunfire directed against the Al-Amal Hospital. In Gaza City, residents said fighting continued against Israeli forces. Health officials said two people were killed by sniper fire. Israeli forces carried out arrests in the southern suburb of Tel Al-Hawa. — Reuters

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وزارة النقل والاتصالات وتقنية المعلومات
Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology

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Civilians among 16 dead in US strikes in Iraq: Govt

BAGHDAD: US strikes in the west of Iraq against armed groups killed at least 16 people, including civilians, and wounded 23, Iraqi government spokesman Bassem al Awadi said on Saturday.

The strikes hit “locations in the Akashat and Al-Qaim regions, including areas where our security forces are stationed”, Awadi said in a statement.

The United States carried out the strikes on Friday in retaliation for the killing of three US military personnel in a drone attack on a base close to Jordan’s border with Syria and Iraq.

Washington blamed the unclaimed attack on the Resistance in Iraq, a loose alliance of fighters opposed to US support for Israel in Gaza.

US President Joe Biden underlined that the overnight strikes were only a beginning. “Our response began today. It will continue at times and places



Shell casings lie at the site of a US airstrike in Al-Qaim, Iraq. – Reuters

of our choosing,” he said in a statement.

His National Security Council spokesman said Washington “did inform the Iraqi government prior to the strikes,” but his remark drew an angry denial from Baghdad.

On Friday, a White House spokesperson said the United States had “warned the Iraqi government before the strikes”.

But Baghdad denied there had been any coordination with Washington prior to the bombings.

Awadi accused the United States of “deception and distortion of facts” and called the suggestion “an unfounded claim crafted to mislead international public opinion and evade legal responsibility” for what he said was a breach of international law.



Security forces inspect a damaged car at the site of a US airstrike, Iraq. – Reuters

“This aggressive air strike will push the security situation in Iraq and the region to the brink of the abyss,” the spokesman said. Awadi condemned the use of Iraq’s territory as a “battleground for settling scores” and repeated his government’s call for the withdrawal of the US-led international coalition in Iraq. The coalition had “deviated from its assigned tasks and

granted mandate,” he said, and was “endangering security and stability in Iraq”.

Analysts said the US strikes were unlikely to stem the flurry of attacks on US targets around the Middle East sparked by US support for Israel in Gaza war.

The strikes represent a “significant escalation,” according to Allison McManus, managing director for national

security and international policy at the Center for American Progress.

There are roughly 2,500 US troops deployed in Iraq and about 900 in Syria.

Since mid-October, there have been more than 165 drone and rocket attacks against coalition troops in Iraq and Syria, with most being claimed by the Resistance in Iraq. — AFP

This aggressive air strike will push the security situation in Iraq and the region to the brink of the abyss

BASSEM AL-AWADI

Iraqi govt spokesman



People stand on top of damaged buildings to see the wreckage of burnt trunks and tankers after a gas explosion in the Embakasi area of Nairobi on February 2. – AFP

Kenyan president slams ‘incompetence, corruption’ after deadly blast

NAIROBI: Kenyan President William Ruto on Saturday blamed incompetent and corrupt government officials for a deadly gas blast in Nairobi that killed three people and injured 280. A truck laden with gas canisters exploded just before midnight on Thursday in Embakasi, a densely populated Nairobi district, unleashing a trail of destruction and sending people running for their lives.

The Petroleum Institute of East Africa said on Friday that the explosion occurred at an “illegal LPG refilling and storage site” whose owner and some customers had been convicted and sentenced in May 2023.

But Kenya’s National Environment Authority (NEMA) on Saturday said Maxxis Nairobi Energy had obtained permission on February 2 last year to operate the site.

“Preliminary investigations have revealed that four NEMA officers unprocedurally processed the licence and are therefore culpable,” NEMA Board Chairman Emilio Mugo said in a statement.

“The board therefore, directs that the implicated officers step aside immediately pending further investigation by the relevant government agencies,” he said. — AFP

Seoul summons Russian ambassador over comments on North Korea

SEOUL: South Korea summoned Russia’s ambassador on Saturday to protest against “rude and ignorant” remarks after Moscow’s foreign ministry blamed Seoul for rising tensions on the peninsula.

Nuclear-armed North Korea has this year declared Seoul its “principal enemy”, closed agencies dedicated to reunification and outreach.

Russia has recently formed closer ties with Pyongyang, with South Korea and Washington claiming the North has shipped weapons to Moscow for use in its war with Ukraine.

Moscow’s foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that the heightened tension on the Korean peninsula was “primarily due to the brazen policy of the United States and its allies, including the Republic of Korea and Japan”, referring to South Korea by its official name.

Zakharova made the remarks when asked about South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol’s recent description of North Korea as the only country in the world that has legislated the preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

Calling Yoon’s remarks “blatantly biased”, she also said Seoul “doesn’t seem to realise that the United States’ leading



People watch a television screen showing a news broadcast with file footage of a North Korean missile test, at a railway station in Seoul. – AFP file photo

Seoul emphasised to Zinoviev that it is “deeply regrettable that the Russian side unconditionally supported North Korea while turning a blind eye to the truth”

position is irrevocably becoming a thing of the past”, and that the South “may turn out to be no more than a small bargaining chip in Washington’s geopolitical games”.

South Korea’s foreign ministry said on Saturday it had

summoned Russian Ambassador Georgy Zinoviev to Seoul to protest over Zakharova’s comments.

Seoul emphasised to Zinoviev that it is “deeply regrettable that the Russian side unconditionally supported North Korea while

turning a blind eye to the truth” and “criticised the statements of the South Korean leader in a highly disrespectful language”, the foreign ministry said.

Such actions by Moscow would “only further worsen the relationship between South Korea and Russia”, it said.

The ministry earlier called Zakharova’s comments “rude, ignorant and biased below the level of a country’s foreign ministry spokesperson”. — AFP

NEW DELHI

India to replace troops in Maldives with civilians

India will remove its troops in the Maldives by May, the Maldivian Foreign Ministry said on Saturday. The roughly 80 soldiers stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago will be replaced by civilians, officials from both countries said.

The first set of Indian troops will leave by March 10 and the rest by May 10, the Maldives said, citing an agreement reached at a high-level meeting in the Indian capital on a range of issues concerning bilateral cooperation.



India’s foreign ministry said the two countries “agreed on a set of mutually workable solutions to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms” that provide humanitarian services.

— Reuters

ANKARA

Türkiye detains 34 with suspected IS ties

Turkish authorities on Saturday detained 34 people suspected of ties to IS in a wide-ranging operation against the militant group, Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya said on social media platform X. All suspects captured in “Operation-Cage 35” are foreign nationals wanted under an Interpol red notice which requests their arrest, Yerlikaya said, adding that police also seized several unlicensed pistols.

Turkish authorities have ramped up operations against IS



after two gunmen killed a person in an Istanbul church last week during Sunday service. Police have arrested 25 suspects, including two gunmen, in connection with the shooting, Justice Minister Yilmaz Tunc said. — Reuters

MANILA

Death toll from landslides, floods rises to 14

The death toll from landslides and floods triggered by torrential rain in the southern Philippines in the past week has risen to 14, official tallies showed on Saturday.

Rain has pounded parts of Mindanao on and off for weeks and forced tens of thousands of people into emergency shelters.

At least 10 people died in recent days in the mountainous gold mining province of Davao de Oro. “I haven’t experienced that kind of heavy



and continuous rain before,” provincial information officer Fe Maestre said.

Widespread flooding in the adjacent province of Agusan del Sur has inundated villages and crops. — AFP



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In brief

■ MANAUS



BRAZIL'S MILITARY REINFORCES BORDER DUE TO ESEQUIBO

A convoy of military trucks and armoured vehicles set off for Brazil's northern border to reinforce the presence of the Brazilian army in response to tensions over Venezuela's claim to Guyana's Esequibo region. More than two dozen armoured cars arrived in Manaus by river transport and some left by road for Boa Vista, capital of Roraima state, where the local garrison will be increased to 600 soldiers. Army Commander General Tomas Paiva said the Boa Vista garrison would become a regiment with the tripling of equipment and men. The border conflict involves a 160,000-sq km region of Guyana that is more than twice the size of Ireland and mostly thick jungle. — Reuters

■ ATHENS



BOMB EXPLODES NEAR GREEK LABOUR MINISTRY

An explosive device went off overnight in front of the Greek labour ministry in central Athens without causing any casualties, police said on Saturday. The explosion, which caused material damage, was preceded by an anonymous telephone call to the Greek daily Efimerida ton Syntakton about an impending blast. The caller warned that an explosive device had been placed in front of the ministry which would be detonated 40 minutes later. The man claimed to be a member of Revolutionary Class Self-Defence, a previously unknown organisation. — AFP

■ SANTIAGO



AT LEAST 19 DEAD IN CHILE FOREST FIRES

At least 19 people have died in forest fires raging near Chile's coast, Interior Minister Carolina Toha said on Saturday, warning the toll was likely to climb higher. Fifteen of the 19 victims "have already been identified," Toha said on Saturday morning, adding that there were 92 active fires, with 43,000 hectares burned. The blazes are concentrated in the Vina del Mar and Valparaíso tourist regions, where they have ravaged thousands of hectares of forest, cloaked coastal cities in a dense fog of gray smoke and forced people to flee their homes. — AFP

N Ireland appoints Irish nationalist as First Minister

BELFAST: Northern Ireland's parliament appointed an Irish nationalist as First Minister for the first time on Saturday, a historic milestone in a state established a century ago to ensure the dominance of pro-British unionists. Michelle O'Neill's appointment, the delayed result of a watershed 2022 election, is the latest sign of the rise of a Sinn Féin party in the British region that has said its ultimate dream of a united Ireland is "within touching distance." The appointment came as Sinn Féin's pro-British rival, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), formally ended a two-year boycott of the power-sharing government after this week striking a deal with the British government to ease trade frictions. "This is an historic day which represents a new dawn," O'Neill, 47, said in her acceptance speech. "I will serve everyone equally and be a First Minister for all." O'Neill and Sinn Féin President Mary Lou McDonald represent a shift to a new generation of Sinn

Fein politicians not directly involved in the region's decades-long bloody conflict between Irish nationalists seeking a united Ireland and pro-British unionists wanting to remain the United Kingdom. As the former political wing of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Sinn Féin was long shunned by the political establishment on both sides of the border. It is now also the most popular party in the Irish republic ahead of elections due next year. The post of deputy First Minister, which has equal power under Northern Ireland's system of power-sharing government but less symbolic weight, is to be taken by the DUP's Emma Little-Pengelly. A column in the Irish nationalist newspaper *The Irish News* contemplated whether there would ever be another unionist First Minister. There was heavy security around the assembly building, but no signs of trouble. A few dozen trade union members protested over the impact of the government shutdown on workers' pay. — Reuters



Visitors and press members watch Michelle O'Neill make her acceptance speech in the Senate room at the Stormont Parliament Buildings, in Belfast, Northern Ireland. — Reuters

Ukraine says downed nine of 14 Russian drones



A Ukrainian serviceman checks a connection with a Vampire unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) before flying near a front line, in Zaporizhzhia region, Ukraine. — Reuters

KYIV: Ukraine's air force on Saturday said it downed nine out of 14 drones launched by Russia over southern and central regions overnight. Kyiv said most of the drones were directed at energy facilities in the central Dnipropetrovsk region, where thousands have been without power since Russian strikes on Friday. The outages have mainly affected the main city of Kriviy Rig — the home town of President Volodymyr Zelensky. "Ukraine destroyed nine enemy drones within the Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Mykolaiv and Zhytomyr regions," the air force said, adding that most of the drones were directed at "energy infrastructure facilities" in the Dnipropetrovsk region. Regional head Sergey Lysak said 15,000 people were without electricity in the city after the drone strikes. He said fires caused by the strikes affected "two boiler houses" in the city and said "some families were left without water supply". He reported "no deaths

Regional head Sergey Lysak said 15,000 people were without electricity in the city after the drone strikes

or injuries" in the strikes but damage to two private houses. The head of Kryvyi Rig, Oleksandr Vilkul, said energy companies will "introduce schedules of emergency shutdowns" in the city. He said the city's high-speed tram will stop running and that a part of some hospitals will switch to energy generators. Ukraine's energy ministry said it was working to restore critical infrastructure. Russia has targeted Ukraine's energy infrastructure throughout its almost two-year offensive, leaving thousands of people without heat during an intense campaign last year. Meanwhile, a fire broke out overnight at a major Russian oil refinery in the southwestern Volgograd region, authorities said on Saturday, after a drone

strike claimed by Ukraine. A Ukrainian defence source said that Kyiv's SBU security service had "organised" the attack, which came after months of Ukrainian drone attacks against Russia. "Last night, the air defence and electronic jamming repelled an attack by drones in the Volgograd region's Kalachyovsky and Zakanalye districts," governor Andrei Bocharov said on Telegram. "A fire started at the Volgograd refinery after one of the downed drones fell," he said, adding that the fire service had already brought the blaze under control by the start of the morning. Russian emergency services later told local media the fire had been put out. Kyiv, which used not to claim responsibility for such attacks, has changed tactic and now publicly takes responsibility. Russian energy giant Lukoil, which operates the refinery, says on its website that it is "the biggest producer of oil products in the federal South district", which covers eight regions of southwest Russia. — AFP

Berlin police say over 150,000 at anti-right wing demonstration

BERLIN: Despite drizzling rain, significantly more than the 100,000 people announced have gathered in Berlin for a demonstration against the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and the far right. More than 150,000 people are currently on site, the police wrote on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, on Saturday afternoon. The organisers spoke of around 300,000 participants. A total of 100,000 people had been registered. A human chain was planned under the motto "We are the firewall." The action against hate and intolerance is backed by an alliance called Hand in Hand of more than 1,300 organisations. "We want to set an example for solidarity and that we are against discrimination. And that we think it's great when a society with diversity instead of uniformity continues to exist in Germany," said 36-year-old Serkan Bingöl, a Berliner with a German passport and secondary school teacher, who had come with a group of refugees.



Children play with soap bubbles as people gather outside the Reichstag building to protest against right-wing extremism, in Berlin. — Reuters

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has described the numerous planned demonstrations against right-wing extremism this weekend as a "strong sign" in favour of

democracy and the German Basic Law, as the constitution is known. "Whether in Eisenach, Homburg or Berlin: in small and large cities across the country, many citizens are coming

together to demonstrate against forgetting, against hatred and agitation — this weekend too," the Social Democrat (SPD) politician wrote on the social media platform X, formerly

Twitter, on Saturday. The German chancellor had recently repeatedly praised the large-scale demonstrations and took part in a rally in Potsdam just outside Berlin himself in January. For some three weeks now, tens of thousands of people have been taking to the streets all over Germany to protest the far right in general and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party in particular. The protests were triggered by a report by the investigative journalist group Correctiv into a meeting between radical right-wingers and individual politicians from the AfD, the main stream conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) and the ultra conservative Werte Union in Potsdam in November. The gathering discussed how to make large numbers of foreign nationals, including asylum-seekers, what the group called "non-assimilated citizens" and immigrants with German passports, leave the country, even under duress. — dpa

How to be mentally strong ?



Dr Hamed al Sinawi
@alsinawi

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

I recently came across a book titled “13 Things Mentally Strong People Don’t Do” by the American psychotherapist and mental strength trainer Amy Morin.

The book provides the readers with tips on how to develop great mental strength by taking control of their thoughts, behaviours, and emotions. I have selected a few tips to discuss in this column.

The first tip suggested that to be emotionally strong, we should not waste time feeling sorry for ourselves as this feeling is self-destructive and creates negative emotions that have unwanted impacts on us and the people around us. We all know that life is never like a fairy tale, and we are bound to feel disappointment and rejection at times. To overcome this the author recommends practicing gratitude and appreciating what we have rather than feeling sorry for what we don’t have.

The next point is not to give away our power to people around us who may distract us from reaching our goals in life. The following tip is

to embrace positive change and be flexible and adaptable instead of dwelling on what we cannot control and recognise that we don’t need to please people all the time. Therefore, we should say no to things we cannot do while keeping kind to others.

The author mentioned that to be emotionally strong we should take calculated risks before making big decisions to avoid making the same mistakes repeatedly. We should avoid wasting time dwelling on the past and wishing things could be different. Instead, we should acknowledge our past and learn from it and avoid reliving bad experiences or fantasising about the glory days. We should accept responsibility for our actions and learn from our past mistakes. When we are mentally strong, we tend to appreciate and celebrate other people’s success in life without feeling jealous or cheated when others outsmart us. Instead, we recognise that success comes from hard work, and we become more willing to work hard for our chance at success.

Failure is not seen as a reason to give up but as

WE ALL KNOW
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AND REJECTION
AT TIMES

an opportunity to grow and improve. We can also tolerate being alone and we don’t fear silence. Being alone with our thoughts can be used as downtime to relax or reflect on things around us. Part of being mentally strong is the ability to enjoy our own company without depending on others for companionship and entertainment all the time. We also don’t feel entitled to things we have in life such as being taken care of by our spouse or children when we grow old or expecting to be constantly rewarded for our actions.

Instead, we look for opportunities based on our own merits. Not being fixated on immediate results is a characteristic of mentally strong people. Whether we are working on improving our skills at work or developing a healthy lifestyle we should not expect immediate result but apply our skills and time to the best of our ability and understand that real change takes time.

Finally, selecting from the above tips may not solve all your problems but will be steps toward self-improvement.

Madrid airport overwhelmed by asylum seekers

Madrid airport is struggling to cope with an unprecedented influx of African asylum seekers, who have to sleep in cramped, dirty spaces, prompting the Red Cross to stop providing services there in protest.

Hundreds of migrants, the majority from Senegal, have in recent weeks requested asylum after arriving in Madrid while on a layover to other countries, usually ones in South America that do not require entry visas from them, a police union representative said.

While they wait for their claims to be processed they are kept in rooms equipped with bathrooms set aside for migrants seeking asylum.

The government opened a fourth room to cope with the surge in arrivals but some asylum seekers are still forced to sleep on inflatable mattresses or share a bed, according to the Spanish Commission for Aid to Refugees (CEAR), a non-governmental organisation.

“The overcrowding and unsanitary conditions have reached critical levels, causing outbreaks of bedbugs, a build-up of garbage and a shortage of towels for personal hygiene,” it said in a statement.

Videos sent to media by airport police officers show cockroaches on the floor and unsanitary showers. More asylum claims were made at the airport in January — 864 — than during all of 2022, the last year for which official figures are available, when 767 were filed.

The number of migrants held at Madrid airport at the end of January stood at between 390 and 450, according to CEAR and police union SUP, up from 250 at the end of December.

Overwhelmed authorities were unable to stop 17 people from escaping the holding areas by breaking windows, said a police source. Another six people tried unsuccessfully to flee by crawling through a false ceiling, the source said.

After raising concerns about the situation, the Red Cross took the unusual step last week of stopping providing services to asylum seekers at the airport. In addition to Senegal, the migrants are coming from Kenya, Mauritania, Morocco and Somalia.

A representative of the SUP union said that most of them dispose of their identity papers on the plane or declare themselves to be minors to avoid immediate deportation. He asked not to be named because he was not authorised to speak to the media about the sensitive issue.

The migrants usually state in their asylum request that they are from a country in conflict, he added. The influx is causing delays in the processing of asylum applications. At the end of January, 182 people had still not been able to formalise their claims, according to CEAR, with waiting times of up to several weeks. — AFP

A shape-shifting plastic with a flexible future

KATRINA MILLER

With restrictions on space and weight, what would you bring if you were going to Mars? An ideal option might be a single material that can shift shapes into any object you imagine.

In the morning, you could mold that material into utensils for eating. When breakfast is done, you could transform your fork and knife into a spade to tend to your Martian garden. And then when it’s happy hour on the red planet, that spade could become a cup for your Martian beer.

What sounds like science fiction is, perhaps, one step closer to reality. Researchers at the University of Chicago Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering have created a new type of plastic with properties that can be set with heat and then locked in with rapid cooling, a process known as tempering. Unlike classic plastics, the material retains this stiffness when returned to room temperature.

The findings, published in the journal Science on Thursday, could someday change how astronauts pack for space.

“Rather than taking all the different plastics with you, you take this one plastic with you and then just give it the properties you need as you require,” said Stuart Rowan, a chemist at the University of Chicago and an author of the new study.

But space isn’t the only place the material could be useful. Rowan’s team also sees its potential in other environments where resources are scarce — like at sea or on the battlefield. It could also be used to make soft robots and to improve plastics recycling.

“We all depend on plastics in our day-to-day lives,” said Shrayesh Patel, a chemical engineer at the University of Chicago and an author of the new study. But foam cups, trash bags and eyeglass lenses, for example, all require plastics with different properties.

A single material that can be fashioned to different needs, on the other hand, “simplifies how you make plastics,” Patel said. It also would make plastic more sustainable because items could all be processed together when recycling. That plastic must be sorted when recycling contributes to only a small fraction being reused, he explained.



From left, in an undated photo provided by John Zich/University of Chicago Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering, Nicholas Boynton, Shrayesh Patel and Stuart Rowan of the University of Chicago, with a new type of plastic with properties that can be set with heat and then locked in with rapid cooling, a process known as tempering. — NYT

Modern plastics are made of chains of molecules that are permanently bonded, making them difficult to break down. But the Chicago researchers say their new material is “pluripotent” — a term typically used to describe the generic property of stem cells — or made of bonds that can be broken and re-formed using heat.

MODERN PLASTICS ARE MADE OF CHAINS OF MOLECULES THAT ARE PERMANENTLY BONDED, MAKING THEM DIFFICULT TO BREAK DOWN. BUT THE NEW MATERIAL IS MADE OF BONDS THAT CAN BE BROKEN AND RE-FORMED USING HEAT

They were inspired by the way blacksmiths temper, or gradually heat and then rapidly cool, steel in a furnace. But unlike metal, plastics are lightweight and can be moulded at temperatures achievable with an oven or stovetop.

The researchers heated the reddish, translucent plastic to temperatures between 140 and 230 degrees Fahrenheit and then stashed it in a freezer to quickly cool it. When tempered at lower temperatures, more molecular bonds formed, making the plastic stiffer. But

at higher temperatures, the material became softer and stickier.

The team moulded the plastic into a spoon rigid enough to scoop peanut butter from a jar and a fork that could pick up cheese. They also made adhesive strong enough to stick two pieces of glass together and a small claw similar to what you might find in a toy machine.

Julia Kalow, a chemist at Illinois’ Northwestern University who was not involved in the study but wrote a perspective on the results for Science, found the idea of a single material that could achieve a variety of properties unique and exciting. “Now that we know it might be useful to achieve this property, a lot of other researchers will be inspired to find new ways to accomplish that goal,” she said.

There are limitations to the first generation of pluripotent plastic. Though the team has shown that the material can be reprocessed at least seven times and hold its shape for at least a month, there is uncertainty about its shelf life.

“They’re not going to be drop-in replacements for commodity plastics yet,” said Nicholas Boynton, a graduate student at the University of Chicago who led the experiments for the study. The material can’t yet reach the toughness of a plastic bag, for example, nor the elasticity of a rubber band. “We’re not quite there in those yet, but we’re pretty close,” Boynton said. “I think having one material that can access this huge range is what’s really exciting at this point.” — The New York Times

Once upon a time, man ruled...

In the beginning... back in the day... long ago... and far, far, far away... Mammoths, bears, and wolves ruled a frozen Earth, and man, the original hunter gatherer, kept himself warm by killing them and surviving wrapped in the dead animal's woolly pelts, 'snug-as-a-bug' in a cave.

Then man discovered fire, and found they didn't need the pelts all the time, and snuggling up to a woman was quite nice, when the women weren't cooking over the fireplace, and cleaning the cave, of course. Well, one thing led to another and of course those snuggles became a bit more serious, and kids were 'invented.' Well, that started man thinking, and he thought if we make lots of kids, the boys will grow up to be workers, and warriors and the girls, women, who could do the cooking, cleaning, and washing up, as well as feeding, clothing, and caring for the ever growing tribe of kids. After all, they never had much else to do... a bit of gathering maybe, but they couldn't be trusted with a spear or a knife... God forbid.

Fast forward a few millennia, and not much had changed, except man had learned to negotiate with other men, rather than fighting and killing each other all the time. Still, mortality was ever-present, and still survival of the fittest led to there being 'leaders,' of 'groups' that went their separate ways, and became, I guess... societies.

These required their leaders to have more of everything, to look better than anyone else, and to be obeyed... and all the 'leaders' were men of course. Now the thing was, that in addition to encouraging their men and women to keep producing kids, who became workers, warriors, and more and more fertile women to make even more kids, those leaders invented levies, otherwise known as taxes. Those leaders realised this taxation was money-in-the-bank, to coin a phrase, and pushed even harder for increased procreation, more kids, more people, more



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TODAY, THE EVEN MORE STRIDENT, MORE DEMANDING, AND LESS TOLERANT FEMININE VOICE DOESN'T JUST NEED TO BE HEARD, BUT MUST BE LISTENED TO

warriors and workers, blah, blah, blah, and even more taxation. It was a perpetual cycle... and a recipe for the growth of civilisation as we know it.

They didn't need to worry about old people in those olden days, because life expectancy was short, and old people who dared to live past 40 or 50, were usually either staked out as bait for lions and tigers (goats were too precious), or in the case of women, were just made to wash, cook, and clean until they dropped.

Eventually, man evolved an industrial revolution, and a shedload of global military revolutions inspired 'democratic,' changes to the generic new civilisation. Leaders were voted in, but only by men, as women were way too fragile to understand politics. They were tolerated in a state of sociological subservience for ages, but during the last century their pleas were heard, and they could, after refusing to do the housework, cooking and cleaning, vote.

That was the thin end of the feminine wedge, and times have changed. Today, the even more strident, more demanding, and less tolerant feminine voice doesn't just need to be heard, but must be listened to. Oh, how the worm, to use a somewhat appropriate turn of phrase, has turned!

A clearly evident consequence of this societal about turn has been that, first of all, given the technological and scientific advances of the last century, people are living longer now, and there are a lot more old people about, clogging up the supermarket aisles and footpaths with their mobility scooters... It's a nightmare! I mean, you can't just push them out the door and leave them to the lions anymore, can you? Correspondingly, because women have more voice... they're having fewer kids. Or maybe even the latest, almost traumatic evolution of gender determination means there are more confused males/females who don't know whether they are meant to be mums

CARNIVAL REVELRY



Participants wearing carnival costumes parade across Ponte dell'Accademia during Venice's carnival in Venice on Saturday. – AFP

Matchmakers for the green transition

The pledges made at last year's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in Dubai reflect the growing political will to tackle climate change head on and in an equitable way. But while governments are taking the lead in accelerating the green transition, they cannot finance it alone. Fortunately, the appetite for sustainable investment is greater than ever: environmental, social, and governance (ESG) assets are expected to reach \$50 trillion in 2025. The difficulty lies in matching investors with viable green projects.

Achieving the global goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 requires coordinated investment on a scale never before seen. Goldman Sachs recently estimated that roughly \$4 trillion — 4% of global GDP — in annual clean-energy investment will be needed to reach this target every year for the next decade. Yet, as it stands, only \$1.1 trillion is being invested in decarbonisation each year, with a focus on lower-risk, subsidy-driven technologies such as wind and solar generation and electric vehicles (EVs).

Given this shortfall, and governments' limited financial resources, the private sector must find innovative ways to attract investment in projects that will slow global warming and ensure a just energy transition for all. Success will depend on a strong incentive to deliver results for the climate and the economy; sufficient investment capital; and the development of an ecosystem of technical, finance, and operational specialists with the



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THE PRIVATE SECTOR MUST FIND INNOVATIVE WAYS TO ATTRACT INVESTMENT IN PROJECTS THAT WILL SLOW GLOBAL WARMING AND ENSURE A JUST ENERGY TRANSITION

skills needed to execute the net-zero transition — a crucial but underappreciated variable.

Similar ecosystems in other sectors, such as biotech, have shown how a coordinated group of experts working together closely can help accelerate progress. While such a group has yet to form for green industry, owing to its fragmentation, all the ingredients are there.

A crucial part of mobilising new climate-finance flows is identifying alternative investment options that are attractive to a wide range of investors, both geographically and in terms of size. Today's biggest investors focus too much on large-scale commitments and high-impact headlines. For example, news from the recent COP28 summit centred on multibillion-dollar pledges from massive private investment groups such as Brookfield, Apollo, and TPG, whose combined assets under management total around \$12 trillion.

The funding requirements for green projects, including in clean energy (hydrogen, carbon sequestration, biogas, battery storage, waste recycling, and more), transport (EVs), agri-tech, and hard-to-abate heavy industries, are growing rapidly. But these projects are becoming divided between large, government-led infrastructure initiatives and

smaller to mid-size ones driven by the private sector. Financing the full spectrum is essential to tackle climate change effectively.

This is where digital platforms can help. By matching investors with green projects in the smaller to mid-size category (valued below \$250 million for an individual project), they could bring greater visibility to initiatives of this size while also indicating their bankability. Furthermore, such platforms should facilitate access to expert service providers — from law firms to technical advisers and ESG consultants — who can support the transaction and the project more generally, and

should be facilitated by a drive to standardise documentation. Previous efforts have centred on crowdfunding micro-projects and pushing the public sector to take the lead, and thus never attained the critical mass needed for a functioning ecosystem.

One new digital platform that could help reach this critical mass is VerdEx, which is launching this month and has strategic partners around the world. By shining a light on bankable projects that require funding and offering an ecosystem of relevant specialists, VerdEx aims to connect institutional investors to green projects in the smaller to mid-size

category and reduce friction, which would lower overall financing costs. Moreover, VerdEx will invest a portion of its revenue in an impact fund to help deliver a just and equitable energy transition.

Efforts like this will be critical to attracting a wider range of institutional investors to less gargantuan, but no less important, green projects. With governments and private investment funds remaining focused on big-ticket projects, this type of matchmaking will help us use all avenues available to reduce global emissions and meet our climate commitments.

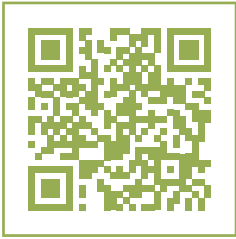
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Success will depend on a strong incentive to deliver results for the climate and the economy.

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OMAN SHINES WITH 25 MEDALS
AT WEST ASIAN PARALYMPICS

MUSCAT TO HOST 5TH EDITION OF WAPG IN 2026



Dr Mansour al Touqi receiving the fifth edition of WAPG

AHMED AL KAABI
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Oman Paralympic teams concluded their participation in the fourth edition of the West Asian Paralympic Games (WAPG), held in Sharjah, UAE, by clinching an impressive tally of 25 colourful medals.

Twelve countries participated in the 4th WAPG, represented by 513 members, including 382 players and 131 coaches and administrators, competing in 7 sports: weightlifting, table tennis, badminton, goalball, wheelchair basketball, boccia and athletics.

During the ceremony, Dr Abdul Razzaq bin Rashid, President of the West Asian Paralympic Federation, handed over the flag of the fifth edition of the games, set to take place in Muscat in 2026. The flag was officially received by Dr Mansour bin Sultan al Touqi, President of the Omani Paralympic Committee.

Following the flag handover, Dr Abdul Razzaq bin Rashid announced the conclusion of the fourth edition of the West Asian Paralympic Games, wishing



success to the Sultanate of Oman in organising the fifth edition in 2026 in Muscat.

Before the closing ceremony, Fadel al Hadi, a member of the Oman national weightlifting team, won a silver medal in the 72-kilogramme weight category

by lifting 135 kilogrammes. This brought the total medal count to 25 for the participating national Paralympic teams.

Following the ceremony, Dr Mansour al Touqi expressed his profound joy upon receiving the flag for the forthcoming

fifth edition of the West Asian Paralympic Games. He extended a warm invitation to all West Asian nations to partake in this momentous event, set to unfold across seven individual and team sports. The Sultan Qaboos Sports Complex in Bausher



will serve as the battlegrounds for weightlifting, athletics, badminton, boccia and table tennis, alongside wheelchair basketball and goalball for team-based competitions.

Al Touqi affirmed that the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth, represented by the Oman Paralympic Committee, all set to organise this sports event, which is one of the objectives under Oman Vision 2040.

He underscored the imperative to redouble efforts in player preparation and the integration of novel disciplines absent from the previous edition in Sharjah.

Such endeavours demand unwavering support from governmental bodies, notably the Culture, Sports and Youth, as well as robust backing from the

private sector, pivotal in fortifying the national Paralympic teams' prowess as they strive for podium honours.

Al Touqi added that the achievements of the national teams in the 4th edition of the WAPG place a great responsibility on them to double efforts in preparing the players and implementing several new games in which they did not participate in the fourth edition in Sharjah.

This requires significant and multiplied efforts and support from the Culture, Sports and Youth, as well as from the private sector, upon which they rely heavily to support the national Paralympic teams in the upcoming period to prepare them in a manner that enables them to compete for podium positions.

7th Arab Women Sports Tournament begins in Sharjah

SHARJAH: Shaikha Jawaher bint Mohammed al Qasimi, Chairperson of Sharjah Women's Sports (SWS), officially inaugurated the 7th edition of the Arab Women Sports Tournament (AWST) in Sharjah on Friday.

The opening ceremony, held at Al Majaz Amphitheatre, commenced with the raising of flags representing 15 Arab countries, signalling the commencement of the largest women's sports event in the Arab world.

The 7th edition features the participation of 560 athletes and 63 teams from 15 Arab countries, competing across 8

events until February 12.

The ceremony began with the raising of the flags of AWST as well as the Arab National Olympic Committees, and the Arab League by Shaikh Khaled bin Ahmed al Qasimi, Chairman of the Higher Steering Committee for AWST, Abdulaziz al Anazi, Secretary-General of the Arab National Olympic Committees, and Faisal Ghassal, member of the Oversight and Follow-up Committee at the Arab National Olympic Committees.

The opening ceremony showcased a parade of delegations and women sports teams from Jordan, Bahrain,



Oman team during the opening ceremony.

Algeria, Syria, Sudan, Iraq, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the United Arab Emirates, proudly raising their national flags, symbolising unity and sportsmanship.

The ceremony proceeded with the athletes taking the athletes' oath, led by Al Yazia al Suwaidi, a prominent basketball player at the Sharjah Women Sports Club and a member of the UAE Basketball National team. All participating athletes echoed the oath in unison.

Following this, the referees' oath was administered by Raja Khalid Faisal, who serves as the Chairman of the Referees

Committee in the Shooting Union Federation, representing all referees overseeing the games.

Shaikha Jawaher bint Mohammed al Qasimi, wife of the Ruler of Sharjah, welcomed the audience and athletes, stating, "Greetings to you in the Emirate of Sharjah, in the United Arab Emirates, your second home that embraces your sporting talents and celebrates your victories. We recognise that each one of you came to Sharjah carrying a dream that you set for yourself, and an ambition that takes you to various sports arenas to compete, win medals, and carry your country's name on the stages of victory."



India's Yashasvi Jaiswal celebrates. — Reuters

Jaiswal's 209, Bumrah's six wickets put India on top in England Test

VISAKHAPATNAM: Opener Yashasvi Jaiswal's 209 and six wickets by pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah put India firmly in command of the second Test against England on Saturday's day two.

Bumrah returned figures of 6-45 and wrist spinner Kuldeep Yadav took three wickets to bowl out England for 253 as the tourists conceded a first-innings lead of 143 in Visakhapatnam.

England lost wickets at regular intervals and, despite a quick start courtesy of Zak Crawley's 76, their innings ended in the third session after skipper Ben Stokes' 47.

"Bumrah bowled unbelievably well," Crawley said.

"I felt it was a better wicket than last week to bat on it at that point and there wasn't much turn, but you got to hold your hand up sometimes and say 'well bowled'."

Crawley also praised Jaiswal for his "unbelievable innings".
"Really big fan of the way

he goes about it, he's really aggressive and it's obviously going to be a very special knock," he said.

India were 28-0 at stumps in their second innings to extend the lead to 171. Jaiswal, on 15, and skipper Rohit Sharma, on 13, were batting.

Jaiswal set up India's dominance with his first Test double century to steer the hosts to 396 all out in the first session after they started the day on 336-6. In reply, England lost Ben Duckett for 21 off Kuldeep but fellow opener Crawley, on his 26th birthday, kept up the charge in his 78-ball blitz laced with 11 fours and two sixes.

Crawley attacked with three straight fours off Bumrah in a demonstration of England's fearless "Bazball" style of play and raised his fifty with a six.

But he mistimed off Axar Patel's left-arm spin for a brilliant running catch by Shreyas Iyer and India capitalised on the error. — AFP

MBAPPE INSPIRES PSG TO 2-1 WIN OVER STRASBOURG

STRASBOURG: Kylian Mbappe grabbed a goal and an assist as Paris St Germain secured a 2-1 victory at Strasbourg on Friday, extending their Ligue 1 lead to nine points.

PSG are top of the standings with 47 points, with second-placed Nice on 38 points. Nice face third-placed Brest, who have 35 points, on Sunday. Strasbourg are 10th with 25 points.

The match got off to an exciting start as, within a minute from kickoff, PSG goalkeeper Gianluigi Donnarumma made a diving save to deny Moise Sahi's close-range shot.

Following that, PSG earned a penalty minutes later due to a late tackle on forward Randal Kolo Muani by Lucas Perrin, with Strasbourg goalkeeper Alaa Bellaarouch saving Mbappe's attempt.

PSG broke the deadlock after 31 minutes when Bellaarouch's clearance was blocked by Marco Asensio before bouncing to

Four minutes into the second half, PSG doubled their lead as Mbappe manoeuvred down the left, delivering a cross into the box for the unmarked Asensio who shot into the far bottom corner.

Mbappe, who slotted it into the empty net.

Four minutes into the second half, PSG doubled their lead as Mbappe manoeuvred down the left, delivering a cross into the box for the unmarked Asensio who shot into the far bottom corner.

Strasbourg reduced the deficit in the 68th minute when Dilane Bakwa volleyed in a cross at the back post. However, they couldn't beat Donnarumma, who made several saves, securing the win for the visitors.

"If we analyse the match from the beginning, it's a good match against a strong rival, in good form, especially at home," PSG manager Luis Enrique said.

"We had a very positive mentality; when we needed to defend, we did it. Our goal is also to control the matches and know how to defend."

PSG will next host Brest in the last 16 in the French Cup on Wednesday. — Reuters



Kylian Mbappe celebrates scoring their first goal with Marco Asensio. — Reuters

Messi mania hits Hong Kong as thousands flock to Miami training

HONG KONG: Tens of thousands of football fans turned out to see Lionel Messi train with his Inter Miami teammates in Hong Kong on Saturday, as "Messi mania" took hold of the city.

Police closed off streets around the Hong Kong Stadium as fans flocked to catch sight of the Argentina superstar, the greatest player of his generation, ahead of a match on Sunday.

Hours before Inter Miami strode onto the pitch for an open training session, expectant fans were forming long queues outside the 40,000-capacity venue, chanting the World Cup-winning

captain's name.

The Major League Soccer club is co-owned by David Beckham, who also put in an appearance to huge roars from an almost full house.

But the roof was nearly blown off a few minutes later by the ovation the 36-year-old Messi received as he emerged to join his teammates on the pitch for a gentle workout.

The eight-time Ballon d'Or winner spent much of the hour-long session doing stretches as he protected a niggling hamstring injury, though he did join 80 lucky Hong Kong schoolchildren for a kickabout during a coaching



clinic that followed. Soon after, Beckham took charge of teaching the kids some skills.

But it was Messi that the thousands of fans had mainly come to see, ahead of a friendly

against a Hong Kong Select XI on Sunday.

"It's the first time in my life I see Messi," said 17-year-old Chinese student Li Weiyl, who had travelled from Shenzhen, across the border in mainland China. "I am feeling very excited. He means a lot to me. He brought me to the football world, he made me love football."

Most fans wore blue-and-white-striped Argentina or pink Inter Miami shirts.

"He is very skilful, very enjoyable to watch him play," said Sally Liu, a 28-year-old student from Hong Kong who was sporting a T-shirt

commemorating Messi and Argentina's 2022 World Cup win in Qatar.

"He is playing now in Miami so I will not have many chances to watch him in the future. This is my last chance."

"He is the best ever. I cried when they became world champions."

On Friday, hundreds had gathered outside the team hotel in the south of the city hoping to catch a glimpse of their hero.

A traditional junk boat was cruising around the harbour with Messi's face plastered across sails in the pink colours of Inter Miami. — AFP



Qatar beat Uzbekistan on penalties to reach semis



AL KHOR: Hosts and holders Qatar moved into an Asian Cup semifinal against Iran after beating Uzbekistan 3-2 on penalties following a 1-1 draw on Saturday.

Goalkeeper Meshaal Barsham was the hero for Qatar after saving three penalties in the shootout.

Pedro Miguel dispatched their final penalty in front of almost 60,000 fans at the tent-like Al-Bayt Stadium north of Doha.

Qatar also missed twice in the shootout, with Almahdi Ali blazing horribly over.

Qatar had won their four previous games at the tournament but they were given a stiffer test by Uzbekistan, who some had tipped as dark horses to lift the trophy.

Qatar opened the scoring midway through the first half when captain Hassan Al-Haydos forced an own goal from goalkeeper Utkir Yusupov.

But Uzbekistan levelled just before the hour when Odiljon Hamrobekov broke free of the Qatar defence and drilled a shot into the corner of the net.

Qatar's opponents in the semifinal will be Iran, who beat pre-tournament favourites Japan 2-1 in the day's earlier quarterfinal.

Qatar won the Asian Cup for the first time in 2019 and they went into the game on a run of 11 straight wins in the competition.

Forward Akram Afif was looking for his fifth goal of the tournament and he thumped an early left-footed shot that Yusupov managed to parry away.

Qatar kept up the pressure and broke the deadlock in the 27th minute when Haydos wriggled clear in the box and hit a shot from a tight angle that Yusupov fumbled into his own net.

The goal spurred Uzbekistan into their first attack of the game and Otabek Shukurov almost

scored when his deflected shot looped up over goalkeeper Barsham.

Qatar then had Mohammed Waad to thank when the defender threw himself at a last-gasp block to keep out Azizbek Turgunboev's goal-bound effort.

But Qatar continued to threaten at the other end and Yusupov kept out a point-blank header from Almahdi Ali with half-time approaching.

Jaloliddin Masharipov drove

a shot just wide as Uzbekistan made a bright start to the second half and they got their reward with the equaliser minutes later.

Hamrobekov latched onto a loose ball and surged into the box before hitting his shot across the goalkeeper and in.

Both teams had chances to snatch dramatic winners in second-half injury time, and Qatar's Almo'ez Ali also went close as extra time drew to a close.

— AFP

Iran score 96th-minute winner to stun Japan and reach semis

DOHA: Alireza Jahanbakhsh scored a 96th-minute penalty to give Iran a dramatic 2-1 win over Japan on Saturday and set up an Asian Cup semifinal against holders Qatar or Uzbekistan.

It capped a stunning comeback from Iran, who were behind at the break but roared back to dump out the pre-tournament favourites and keep alive their dream of a first Asian title since 1976.

Hidemasa Morita gave Japan, who were looking to lift the trophy for a record-extending fifth time, the lead midway through the first half in front of 36,000 at Education City Stadium in Doha.

Mohammad Mohebi drew Iran -- themselves champions three times -- level 10 minutes after half-time and they dominated the remainder of the game.

But just when it looked like extra time, Kou Itakura brought Hossein Kanaanizadegan down in the box and skipper Jahanbakhsh held his nerve to spark delirium on the pitch and in the stands.

Coach Amir Ghalenoei said his players were "fantastic" in the second half.

"They gave everything for the Iranian people," he said.

"This can be a turning point for Iranian football."

Ghalenoei, whose side squeezed through on penalties over Syria in the last 16, took a potshot at critics of him and his side back home.

"I am not saying criticism is not good, but some people in the



Iran's defender Ramin Rezaeian and Saman Ghoddos celebrate their team's second goal.—AFP

last 11 months tried to ruin the national team," he said.

- Under pressure - Iran, missing the suspended

Porto forward Mehdi Taremi, had the first sight of goal on 13 minutes when Feyenoord winger Jahanbakhsh fizzed the ball

over goalkeeper Zion Suzuki's crossbar.

Japan seemed flustered initially by their opponents'

physical approach, but they were able to give as good as they got and Itakura picked up a yellow card for cynically stopping an

Iran attack.

On 28 minutes Hajime Moriyasu's side went ahead when Morita hustled his way through a weak challenge and with Iran's defence AWOL, the midfielder was all alone with only Alireza Beiranvand to beat.

He did not strike the ball convincingly but the goalkeeper tried to save with his legs instead of his hands and the ball hit an outstretched limb before looping into the net.

Japan, beaten by Qatar in the 2019 final, went to the break in the lead but there was little in it.

In the 55th minute Iran pulled level when Sardar Azmoun slipped in Mohebi and he beat an exposed Suzuki with a smart first-time finish.

It was all Iran now. Mohebi headed just wide at the far post and then an Azmoun header flashed narrowly past Suzuki's post with the goalkeeper beaten, before the drama at the death.

"They put us under a lot of pressure and we could not resist their pressure," said Moriyasu, whose side were beaten 2-1 by Iraq in the group phase and conceded eight goals during the tournament.

"Against strong opponents we cannot concede goals like we did today.

"We should have scored a second, and if we had, the game would have been different."

Asked about the performance of defender Itakura, Moriyasu replied: "I will leave the criticism to the media."

— AFP



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Oman charts path to green finance leadership

QASIM AL MAASHANI
MUSCAT, FEB 3

Oman's commitment to sustainability takes a bold leap forward with its ambitious green finance plan. Aiming for 100% green financing for sustainable projects by 2040, the Sultanate of Oman is laying the groundwork for a comprehensive framework, acknowledging several key challenges that need to be addressed.

The Ministry of Finance leads the charge by building a Sovereign Sustainable Finance Framework and collaborating with the Muscat Stock Exchange to implement "Triple Governance" for listed companies, integrating



Green finance will support Oman's transition to a clean energy future.

environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors.

The Central Bank of Oman is developing a dedicated framework for the banking sector, while the Oman Sustainability Center establishes a carbon credit trading system, incentivising emission reduction. Even the Oman Investment Authority joins the effort with its own "Triple Governance" framework.

The plan outlines ambitious goals: increasing the share of green finance in sustainable projects from less than 1% in 2022 to 50% by 2025, 67% by 2030, and ultimately reaching 100% by 2040.

Several entities are driving the implementation: the Ministry of Finance, Capital

Market Authority, Muscat Stock Exchange, Central Bank of Oman, Oman Investment Authority, and Oman Sustainability Center. Oman's green finance ambitions are laudable and critical for the nation's future.

Success hinges on collaboration between the government, financial institutions, and the private sector. Streamlining regulations, enhancing project compliance, and expanding green finance instruments are crucial steps on this journey.

While achieving 100% green finance by 2040 remains a challenging target, the journey itself paves the way for significant environmental and economic progress in Oman.

Power interconnection project to help save 175m litres of diesel annually



Cost-competitive power from the national grid will help displace diesel-fired power plants serving remote parts of Oman.

CONRAD PRABHU
MUSCAT, FEB 3

The Rabt interconnection project – a major initiative to link Oman's standalone grids in the north and south of the country – will result in the closure of as many as 14 diesel-fired electricity generation plants, saving in turn an estimated 175 million litres of diesel while reducing over 474,000 tons of carbon emissions per annum.

Phase 1 of the landmark project connects the Main Interconnected System (MIS) in the North of Oman with the internet network of Petroleum Development Oman (PDO) in the oilfield heartland of the country. It also integrates the local networks of Tanweer in Al Wusta Governorate encompassing the areas of Al Duqm and Mahout.

While the first phase was commissioned during Q4 2023, the second phase of Rabt is currently under tender. It will run further south from Al Duqm and eventually connect with the Dhofar System.

According to Oman Electricity Transmission Company (OETC), the owner and operator of the national grid, a total of 14 power plants operating on expensive

diesel fuel, will be displaced when the interconnection project comes on stream by Q4 2026.

"Overall, the Rabt Project aims to increase the efficiency, integration, and security of the national electricity transmission network.

In addition to reducing carbon emissions. The project's estimated reduction in carbon emissions expected to exceed 474,000 tons per annum after the closure of 14 diesel plants operate with diesel, which will also save up more than 175 million litres on annual basis and reducing costs by more than RO 65 million," OETC stated in newly published 2023 Sustainability Report.

OETC Chief Executive Officer Eng Saleh bin Nasser al Rumhi said the project, along with efforts to boost energy efficiency across the network, will play a key role in achieving Oman's Net-Zero Emission (NZE) Target by 2050. "Our focus on innovation has been instrumental in enhancing the operational efficiency of our transmission network. By adopting the latest smart tools and technologies, we have improved the capacity and efficiency of our transmission networks.

TURN TO P15

Sohar Port and Freezone empowers global trade, drives sustainable progress

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 3

In a powerful display of exceptional accomplishments, Sohar Port and Freezone has solidified its position as a pivotal driver of growth and a vital global logistics hub.

Under the leadership of Emile Hoogsteden, CEO of Sohar Port and Omar bin Mahmoud al Mahrizi, CEO of Sohar Freezone and Deputy CEO of Sohar Port, the port has achieved record-breaking success in 2023, surpassing all expectations and setting new industry standards.

Unveiling their remarkable achievements during the Annual Business Reception at Crown Plaza Qurum, Sohar Port and Freezone demonstrated their strategic value as a key enabler, connecting approximately 2.2 billion people worldwide through land, air, and sea routes.

Sohar Port and Freezone has not only bolstered the nation's economy but has also directly contributed 2.1% to the country's GDP, providing nearly 36,000 employment opportunities, both direct and indirect, handling a staggering 80% of Oman's import and export activities.

The port's undeniable influence on the global trade landscape is evidenced by the arrival of 3,233 ships in 2023, further reinforcing its position as a key player on the international stage.

Sohar Freezone, a beacon of integration and growth, boasts representation from an impressive count of 53 countries operating within its premises.

The exponential increase in warehouse utilisation, reaching an impressive 27,000 square



The port's undeniable influence on the global trade landscape is evidenced by the arrival of 3,233 ships in 2023, further reinforcing its position as a key player on the international stage.

HANDLING A STAGGERING 80% OF OMAN'S IMPORT AND EXPORT ACTIVITIES, SOHAR PORT AND FREEZONE HAS NOT ONLY BOLSTERED THE NATION'S ECONOMY BUT HAS ALSO DIRECTLY CONTRIBUTED 2.1% TO THE COUNTRY'S GDP, PROVIDING NEARLY 36,000 EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES, BOTH DIRECT AND INDIRECT.

metres, reflects the immense trust placed in the freezone's strategic location and its seamless storage and distribution capabilities.

Committed to propelling economic growth within the region, Sohar Port and Freezone celebrated the signing of 12 significant investment agreements totalling a remarkable \$632 million in the past year alone.

Furthermore, six agreements have been inked with leading maritime service companies, aiming to bolster maritime services and support sustainable

growth for small and medium enterprises.

But Sohar Port and Freezone's aspirations extend beyond mere economic milestones. With an unwavering dedication to energy transition and sustainability, the port has embarked on an ambitious journey to establish itself as a global leader.

Initiatives such as the SOHAR Net-Zero Alliance, an alliance of 11 progressive companies targeting the capture of up to 21 million tonnes of CO2 emissions annually, aim to accelerate Oman's transition towards carbon neutrality by 2050 through the adoption of alternative energy resources and sustainable technologies.

Taking corporate responsibility to heart, Sohar Port and Freezone executed 17 impactful initiatives in the past year, including the groundbreaking Maseer programme, the Sidra programme, a student exchange programme, and the

establishment of an artificial intelligence lab in collaboration with Sohar University of Technology and Applied Sciences.

Central to the success and achievements of Sohar Port and Freezone are their invaluable workforce. Not just contributors, but the backbone of the organisation, the port has invested over 1,400 hours of training across 70 comprehensive programmes, resulting in an impressive Omanisation rate of 91%.

It is undeniably the relentless dedication and unwavering commitment of their stakeholders and employees that have propelled Sohar Port and Freezone to these extraordinary heights.

Looking ahead, Sohar Port and Freezone vows to enhance support for their esteemed clients, ignite innovative solutions, and embrace sustainable practices to pave the way for an unparalleled digital future and unprecedented growth.

Bank Muscat partners in planting 300 olive trees in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar



The agreement was signed by Talib bin Saif al Makhmari, Mahmood bin Salim al Tobi and Ishaq bin Nasser al Nabhani.

MUSCAT: In line with its commitment to social responsibility and community service, Bank Muscat, the leading financial service provider in the Sultanate of Oman, signed a partnership agreement for planting 300 Olive trees in the village of Al Manakhir, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar.

The plantation project will be implemented across different phases over a period of 8 months. The agreement was signed at the Bank's Head Office by Talib bin Saif al Makhmari, Head of Community & Media Relations, Bank Muscat, Mahmood bin Salim al Tobi, the person responsible for endowments and mosques in Al Manakhir village, Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, and Ishaq bin Nasser al Nabhani, the CEO of the company responsible for implementing the project.

The plantation project falls under Bank Muscat's CSR sustainable initiatives, set with the aim to support the community and nurture the Sultanate of Oman's economic growth through the launch of projects that have sustainable impact from the ecological, social, and economic perspectives.

Bank Muscat's contribution to the project included providing financial support to foster a successful implementation process of planting the Olive trees. Furthermore, the project will contribute to the sustainable development of the ecological system by widening the plantation

areas in the village.

In fact, Olive trees are of economic value, since they can contribute to the realisation of good returns. Additionally, the Olive can be cropped in large quantities due to the nurturing climate conditions in Al Jabal Al Akhdhar. The Olive crops will be utilised for practicing various industries such as the crop pressing processes.

Speaking on the occasion, Talib bin Saif al Makhmari, Head of Community & Media Relations, Bank Muscat, said: "We are proud of this partnership which emphasises the Bank's commitment to serving the society and supporting the Sultanate of Oman's sustainable economy.

The Olive tree plantation project implemented in the well-conditioned agronomic areas in Al Manakhir will help in achieving the ecological, social, and economic goals set to support the people of the village, as the entire community will be supported by the returns realised.

Bank Muscat, will uphold its pioneering role in supporting the society through the implementation of such strategic and sustainable plans to serve the needs of the local communities." Talib al Makhmari added: "The Bank is committed to supporting the local community in multiple areas that bring about great social impact, including education, youth, sports, health, SMEs, and environment."

Jindal Shadeed Iron & Steel awarded great place to work certification

MUSCAT: Jindal Shadeed Iron & Steel (JSIS), a leading player in the steel industry, proudly announces its certification by Great Place to Work, a globally recognised accolade based on feedback from current employees. The certification underscores JSIS's commitment to fostering a workplace culture that is unparalleled in its positive impact on employee experience.

The certification from Great Place to Work, known for its expertise in workplace culture, employee experience, and leadership behaviours, is a testament to JSIS's dedication to creating an environment that drives revenue, enhances employee retention, and fuels innovation.

Sarah Lewis-Kulin, Vice President of Global Recognition at Great Place to Work, remarked, "Certification as a 'Great Place to Work' is a distinguished honour that reflects the tireless efforts put into building an exceptional employee experience. This recognition is exclusively earned through genuine, real-time feedback from employees, signifying JSIS's position as one of the most esteemed employers, with a resolute commitment by its senior management."

JSIS actively participated in the Great Place to Work Middle East Trust Index survey and recognition process in November 2023, following a prior pulse survey in April 2023

This ongoing endeavour aimed to elicit invaluable insights and feedback from employees, enabling JSIS to tailor its organisational strategies and practices to exceed employee expectations continually. The extraordinary response from JSIS employees underscores the organisation's unwavering dedication to transparency and



The certification underscores JSIS's commitment to fostering a workplace culture that is unparalleled in its positive impact on employee experience.

continuous improvement.

With an increase in the engagement score from 77 per cent in April 2023 to 82 per cent in November 2023, JSIS has achieved the esteemed status of being recognised and certified as a Great Place to Work.

Harsha Shetty, Chief Executive Officer of JSIS, expressed his enthusiasm, stating, "We are delighted to attain the Great Place to Work Certification as we prioritise the employee experience each day.

The unwavering dedication of our employees has been instrumental to our ongoing success. We extend our sincere appreciation for their enthusiastic and productive participation, as well as our collective effort in establishing a thriving ecosystem at JSIS, where employee well-being, trust, pride, and enjoyment are paramount.

Congratulations and heartfelt thanks to our entire team."

By earning the Great Place to Work Certification, Jindal Shadeed Iron & Steel demonstrates

its steadfast commitment to nurturing a workplace culture that is both inspiring and rewarding for its employees. This prestigious recognition underscores JSIS's ongoing efforts to cultivate a workplace culture that prioritises the well-being and success of its employees.

Dr Sanjeev Dixit, Chief Human Resources Officer at JSIS, emphasised, "The cornerstone of any organisation's success lies in its people. Their collective energy, dedication, and commitment propel us forward. We are unwavering in our goal to enrich employee engagement by embodying our core values in both words and actions.

By addressing areas for improvement and leveraging our strengths, we are dedicated to ensuring a fulfilling and thriving workplace for all. We aim to make our employee experience and culture programmes shine as exemplars, reflecting the values and aspirations that define us as a great workplace.

We celebrate and extend our heartfelt thanks to our exceptional team, whose contributions have made this remarkable recognition possible. As we continue to pursue our vision of being world-class employers, we are dedicated to building world-class teams led by world-class leaders."

The Great Place to Work certification signifies a significant milestone for JSIS, reinforcing its position as a leading employer dedicated to nurturing a workplace where employees thrive, grow, and take pride in their contributions.

Saif al busaidy, General Manager – Human Resources & Corporate Affairs, further emphasised, "Jindal Shadeed has a winning team of passionate, dedicated, compassionate, diverse, and inclusive human capital, united by a common goal – to make JSIS an employer of choice by creating an inspiring ecosystem. The Great Place to Work certification serves as further validation of this commitment and spirit."

Sohar International achieves PCI data security standard compliance certification

MUSCAT: In line with its unwavering commitment to excellence, Sohar International is delighted to announce that it has achieved Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard (PCIDSS) version 4.0 Compliance, marking a significant milestone as the first bank in Oman to obtain this certificate version.

This achievement represents the most rigorous industry-recognised payment-card security standard available globally, reinforcing our focus on an enhanced and holistic customer experience. PCI DSS compliance and certification ensure the security of cardholder data through a set of requirements established by the Payment Card Industry Security Standards Council (PCI SSC), considered the



best mechanism to safeguard sensitive data and information. This, in turn, helps businesses build long-lasting relationships and instil confidence with their customers and vendors.

Majid bin Nasser al Busaidy, Chief Risk Officer of Sohar International, stated, "With the attainment of the PCIDSS certification, we take great pride in reaching this significant milestone.

It reflects our unyielding commitment to ensuring the highest standards of data security, including the continuous maintenance of information security policies, procedures, processes, technologies, and regulations to minimise payment card data theft, misuse, and fraud. This achievement not only strengthens our position as a secure financial institution but also underscores our determination to scale up growth with excellence in all aspects of our operations."

Kia K5 GDI GTL now with exclusive benefits

MUSCAT: The Kia K5 GDI GTL is one of the most stylish and exciting sedans in the Kia range. Customers owning the K5 GDI GTL can now benefit with service up to 5 years / 50,000 kms (whichever is earlier) and attractive instalments. (Conditions apply. Please visit any Kia showroom for details.)

The K5 GDI GTL with its sleek profile makes a lasting impression highlighting an angular design language and the brand's new chapter in boldness and passion.

Adding to this is the K5's low-slung and fastback silhouette from the side, highlighted by a chrome garnish that spans the roofline and wraps around the rear glass.

The K5 GDI GTL's exterior is enhanced with a number of features including LED Headlamps, LED Daytime



Running Lights, LED Front Fog Lamps, LED Rear Fog Lamps, LED Rear Combination Lamps, Solar Glass, Panoramic Sunroof and Dual LED Headlamps.

The K5 GDI GTL is equipped with a powerful 2.5L engine that offers 191 HP and 25.1 KG.M. Torque. This is paired to an 8-speed Automatic Transmission.

Increasing exciting experiences on every journey are a range of features including Drive Mode Select, Auto Cruise Control, Power Driver Seat, Auto AC,

Power Passenger Seat, Premium Music System, Red Leather Seats, Ventilated Front Seats, Paddle Shifter, Aluminium Pedals, Mood Lamp, Android Auto & Car Play and more.

The K5 GDI GTL's Interior is enhanced with a newly designed infotainment display that seamlessly stretches into the instrument panel, creating a futuristic, three-dimensional layout and driver-centric space. Creating an inviting and comfortable interior are a range of features that include Tinted Glass, Tilt & Telescopic Steering, Radio with USB, Audio Remote Control, Driver's Seat Height Adjuster, Rear AC Vents, Leather AT Knob and more.

Keeping smiles intact are the impressive safety features.

They include Driver and Front Passenger Airbags, Side and Curtain Airbags, Electro Chromic Inside Mirror, Blind Spot Collision Warning (BCW), Blind Spot View Monitor (BVM), Around View Monitor (AVM), Anti-Lock Braking System (ABS), Electronic Stability Program (ESP), Tyre Pressure Monitoring system (TPMS), Front and Rear Parking Assist system and Electric Parking Brake (EPB) with Auto Hold and more.

Reliable International Automotive (RIA), the distributor for Kia in Oman provides a rewarding ownership experience for customers.

Excellent product attributes and unmatched facilities easily ensure their absolute satisfaction, every mile of the way.

Port of Duqm: A strategic multi-purpose trading hub

MUSCAT: The Port of Duqm is one of the key development projects in the Duqm Special Economic Zone, situated strategically along the international shipping route connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe.

It enjoys a competitive advantage due to its proximity to emerging markets in Africa, India, and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Operated by Port of Duqm Company, a joint venture between Asyad Group and Antwerp Port Authority, the port serves various economic and commercial sectors in Oman, regional markets, and international trade.

It comprises three main berths: the Commercial Berth, Government Berth, and Liquid and Bulk Berth. With advanced infrastructure, the port boasts wave breakers totalling around 8.7 kilometres, a harbour basin depth of 18 metres, and an entrance channel of 19 metres, enabling it to accommodate and handle large container ships.

Additionally, Port of Duqm Company and its subsidiaries promote the leasing of land within the 5,000-hectare Duqm Industrial and Logistics Zone, which is part of the Duqm Special Economic Zone, as per the signed concession agreement.

The port provides several incentives to facilitate business operations and enhance competitiveness, positioning itself as a global multi-purpose trading gateway to access various markets. Asyad introduced Duqm Stations in partnership with Port of Duqm Company, managing and operating the General Cargo Station, which includes three



Operated by Port of Duqm Company, the port serves various economic and commercial sectors in Oman, regional markets, and international trade.

commercial berths.

To enhance the infrastructure's comprehensiveness, the new container cranes were launched last year after completion by the Public Authority for Special Economic Zones and Free Zones.

This project marks a significant step in improving the port's capabilities and efficiency, with Port of Duqm Company working closely with the authority to meet international standards in this field.

The new cranes possess high-tech and efficient container handling capabilities, equipped with fifth-generation technologies, including fiber optic data transmission systems controlled remotely by the crane operator. They are also equipped with intelligent driving systems, yard monitoring systems, and automatic landing systems.

Furthermore, they have the capacity to handle the world's largest container ships.

Among the new cranes, there are four container transfer cranes capable of loading up to 65 tonnes, and twelve rubber-tired gantry cranes with a load capacity of 41 tonnes.

The Government Berth in Port of Duqm is the first berth constructed for government entities in Omani ports. Spanning 980 metres in length, the Government Berth occupies a prime location between the dry dock and the Liquid and Bulk Berth, near the Commercial Berth. It is one of the crucial security facilities at Port of Duqm and provides readiness in managing logistics operations for several government entities.

In 2019, infrastructure development for the Government Berth was completed, including buildings for various government entities, staff accommodations, administrative offices, workshops for maintaining boats and ship equipment, and logistic service

areas.

Additionally, the project involved extending electrical, water, communication, and sewage networks, installing four pumps, surface water drainage channels, water tanks, enclosing the Government Berth, and constructing main and security gates.

Furthermore, the Government Berth has approximately 2 kilometres of roads, 7 metres wide, including main roads, internal roads, road lighting, traffic signs, and parking spaces for various vehicle types.

The Liquid and Bulk Berth in Port of Duqm is one of the mega projects that will transform the investment landscape in Duqm, creating a city for exporting petroleum products and green industries.

Its infrastructure was established through two phases, with Phase I finished in 2019 and Phase II completed in the second



Reggy Vermeulen
CEO of Port of Duqm

quarter of 2020.

During Phase I, 79 hectares of the area adjacent to the 4.6-kilometre wave breaker were developed to construct the Liquid and Bulk Berth. The double-cove marina was built along with associated maritime facilities and navigation tools.

Approximately 26 million cubic metres of materials were excavated for deepening the basin to 18 metres and the channel leading to the berth to 19 metres. Around 5 million cubic metres of these materials were used for land reclamation at the designated berth site.

Additionally, a 1-kilometre-long berth wall, along with floating pontoons and navigation aids, was constructed. Phase II expanded the berth reclamation project to include the development of 55 hectares of the area adjacent to the wave breaker, making the berth ready for new companies' operations.

During 2019, Port of Duqm Company handed over Phase I to Duqm Refinery, which constructed its export facilities, storage tanks, buildings, and associated services for exporting

petroleum products produced by the refinery.

Port of Duqm has played a vital role in expanding its cargo base, especially in handling containers related to the fisheries sector, including frozen and dry products. Moreover, it has succeeded in increasing general container handling and the quantity of mineral exports in various forms.

The CEO of Port of Duqm, Reggy Vermeulen, highlighted that the port has attracted significant investments due to its strategic location, world-class infrastructure, and focus on sustainable development. In early 2023, the port signed industrial land reservation agreements with several leading companies in the green hydrogen and green iron sectors.

Port of Duqm aims to attract green hydrogen projects that utilise clean energy sources and adopt a comprehensive and proactive approach to environmental sustainability, including carbon removal and commitment to net-zero emissions.

The management of Port of Duqm has achieved numerous accomplishments, establishing it as a leading maritime and logistics hub in the region. Its strategic location, global-standard infrastructure, and emphasis on sustainable development have attracted significant investments.

The port's success can be attributed to its role in the expansion of cargo handling, particularly in the fisheries sector for frozen and dry products.

Additionally, it has witnessed an increase in general container handling and various mineral exports. — ONA

Power interconnection project to help save 175m litres of diesel annually

FROM PAGE 13

These efforts have not only improved our performance but also contributed to the overall sustainability of Oman's energy transmission sector," he added in the CEO's Message.

OETC, a member of Nama Group, has also pledged to minimum greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by "dispatching the most efficient generation units which consume less gas/fuel and have lower CO2 emissions".

It is prioritising the dispatch of electricity from solar and wind power plants.

According to the transmission grid operator, a 3.86% decrease in GHG emissions was achieved in 2023 as a result of its commitment to prioritising renewable power dispatch over gas-fired generation.

GHG emissions from the gas powered plants totalled 18.730 million tonnes of CO2-equivalent last year, with solar and wind farms contributing to GHG reductions of 778K tonnes of CO2e.

Total banking credit in Oman rises by 7.8% in Q3 2023

MUSCAT: At the end of the third quarter of 2023, the total banking credit for commercial banks in the Sultanate of Oman reached RO 25.3388 billion, compared to RO 23.4938 billion during the same period in 2022, with an increase of 7.8%.

According to the quarterly statistical report issued by the Central Bank of Oman, the personal loans sector accounted for RO 9.3683 billion, representing 38.3% of the total banking credit for commercial banks by the end of September 2023. The industry sector received RO 2.0183 billion, with a

percentage of 8.2, followed by the wholesale and retail trade sector with RO 1.9272 billion, representing 7.9% of the total banking credit. The construction sector received RO 1.8133 billion, accounting for 7.4% of the total banking credit.

The services sector obtained RO 1.7493 billion, representing 7.1% of the credit granted to commercial banks during the first six months of 2023. Additionally, the electricity, transportation, and water sector received RO 1.6186 billion, accounting for 6.6% of the total credit.

The transportation sector obtained RO 1.5183 billion, representing 6.2%, while the financial institutions sector received RO 1.3313 billion, accounting for 5.4%. The mining sector received RO 1.2089 billion, with a percentage of 4.9%.

The report indicates that the banking credit granted to the import sector by the end of the third quarter of 2023 amounted to RO 894.3 million, with a percentage of 1.4%. The government sector received RO 786.7 million, accounting for 3.2% of the total banking credit. — ONA

Effective regulation key to unlocking AI's potential for driving Oman's development

JOMAR MENDOZA
MUSCAT, FEB 3

In a significant development towards the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) in Oman, Dr Talal al Saadi, Director of the Under-Secretary's Office of the Ministry of Interior Oman, shared his insights at the recently concluded Oman AI Summit held at the Grand Millennium Muscat.

Al Saadi underscored the need for a dedicated AI law that aligns with Oman Vision 2040 and ensures the effective and sustainable application of smart technologies.

During a panel discussion, Al Saadi emphasised that to achieve the goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040, the Omani legislators must take a series of strategic steps.

These steps include clearly defining the objectives of the AI law, engaging with all relevant stakeholders, analysing

existing laws for integration and coordination, establishing standards and ethics, promoting research and development, and defining the responsibilities of each party involved.

Following the summit, in a post, Al Saadi highlighted the importance of setting standards for ethical conduct and safety in the use of AI, ensuring the protection of personal data, and defining limits on its application to preserve individual rights and safety.

He stressed the need for mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the law and periodically evaluate its impact.

Moreover, Al Saadi emphasised the significance of enhancing educational programmes and awareness campaigns to enable the public to understand the concept of AI and its impact on society.

He also called for collaboration



To achieve the goals outlined in Oman Vision 2040, the Omani legislators must take a series of strategic steps.

DR TALAL
AL SAADI
Director

Under-Secretary's Office
Ministry of Interior

with other countries to share knowledge and experiences

in the field of AI, as well as the creation of an investment-friendly environment to encourage investment in AI through financial incentives and facilitations.

Al Saadi further emphasised the need to integrate AI policies with information security strategies to address data security challenges.

He highlighted the importance of periodic reviews and updates of the AI law to align it with technological advancements and societal needs.

The comments of Director Al Saadi came against the backdrop of the Oman AI Summit, which brought together influential figures, policymakers, industry leaders, and experts from across the globe.

The summit served as a platform for discussing the potential of AI in promoting development and fostering collaboration among various stakeholders.

Al Saadi reiterated the importance of collaboration between the government, private sector, and civil society in achieving the goals set out in Oman Vision 2040.

He emphasised that the successful implementation of AI in Oman requires a holistic approach that balances the needs of different segments of society and ensures inclusivity.

The insights shared by Talal al Saadi at the Oman AI Summit highlight the commitment of the Ministry of Interior Oman and the Omani government to harness the benefits of AI while safeguarding the interests of individuals and society at large.

The proposed steps towards a dedicated AI law demonstrate a proactive approach towards shaping an enabling environment for AI adoption and driving sustainable development in the Sultanate of Oman.

The difference between CEOs and entrepreneurs



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The writer is an academic lecturer and adviser at Oman College of Management and Technology

I have a few questions on my mind as I proceed with my writing. Do you aspire to be a chief executive officer (CEO) or an entrepreneur? Can a CEO transition into entrepreneurship? Can an entrepreneur take on the role of a CEO? What sets a CEO apart from an entrepreneur? As I delve into research on CEOs, an interesting fact emerged: In 1955, only one Fortune 200 company had a CEO title, while the others held titles such as President or Chairman. Companies like General Motors, Exxon Mobile, Esmark, Amoco, CBS, Texaco, and Shell Oil were examples listed in 1955, and by 1975, nearly all of them were led by CEOs. Historically, the inception of the Chief Executive Officer, as it is recognised in the present era, started to take form in the early 20th century. Even though there were leaders and executives in different organisations before this period, the contemporary role of the CEO is frequently associated with individuals such as Alfred P. Sloan. It was found that, Sloan served



as the CEO of General Motors from the 1920s to the 1950s and is widely acknowledged for his significant contributions to modern management practices. It's important to note that, during this era, the title "CEO" might not have been commonly employed. The Chief Executive Officer is defined as the highest-ranking corporate officer responsible for overall management and administration. Considering this definition, how do we distinguish between a CEO and an entrepreneur? Long (1983) emphasises that modern definitions of entrepreneurship should include innovativeness, risk-taking propensity, and proactiveness. With this in mind, how do CEOs and entrepreneurs differ? In the book "Why We Want You to Become Rich," the distinction between CEO and entrepreneur is highlighted. An entrepreneur is likened to someone building a great race car,

while a CEO is compared to the driver of that race car. The analogy suggests that a great CEO can't win races with a poorly built race car. Considering figures like Bill Gates and Michael Dell, we question whether they were great entrepreneurs or CEOs. Michael Dell's book, "Play Nice But Win," explores his journey from founder to leader, emphasising that an entrepreneur is born. Reflecting on Dhirajlal Hirachand Ambani, the founder of Reliance Industries, how would you describe him? When comparing CEOs and entrepreneurs, my opinion, backed by some research, leans towards the idea that an entrepreneur may become a great CEO, but the reverse isn't necessarily true. CEOs excel at running companies efficiently, like skilled race car drivers. However, not all of them possess the entrepreneurial ability to build or innovate, like entrepreneurs. While many entrepreneurs serve as CEOs in their founded companies, it's rare to find CEOs transitioning to entrepreneurship after retirement.

From zero to 1 million



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CHALLENGING OURSELVES TO REACH HIGHER GOALS IN LIFE IS A GOOD THING. WHAT I DISAGREE WITH IS THE MODALITY. BECOMING A MILLIONAIRE IS A JOURNEY, MADE OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND MISTAKES.

Challenging ourselves to reach higher goals in life is a good thing. What I disagree with is the modality. Becoming a millionaire is a journey, made of learning experiences and mistakes. Reducing it to something that anyone can learn from a 10-minute YouTube video is paradoxical. Also, setting a specific timeframe is not ideal, in my opinion. We have 12 months in a year because Roman Emperors Julius and Augustus wanted to slot in the best summer months for themselves — talking about a long-lasting legacy — otherwise, there would be 10 solar months, and each calendar would have a different counting system, beginning, and end. So, my non-YouTuber advice for those wanting to become millionaires is not to time it over a man-made construct for measuring time, but rather to use your own pace. As with everything in life, the value is in the journey to the goal, not in the goal itself. Some YouTubers begin their videos with an oversimplified table to compute what's really needed to reach \$1 million. For example: Sell a \$200 product to 5,000 people or a \$2,000 product to 500 people. I find these oversimplifications frankly hilarious. They don't differentiate between revenue and profit. If you paid \$100 for the \$200 product, stored 5,000 pieces in a facility costing \$3,000 a month, promoted the business with \$2,000 a month in ads, hired an accountant at \$1,500 a month, and added bills, utilities, transport, shipping costs, refunds, bank fees, taxes, and all the rest, it would be really hard to keep \$250,000 of the whole million.

In January, YouTube bombarded me with videos produced by various influencers promoting the challenge: "From zero to \$1 million in 12 months." Some were bold enough to declare "in 30 days" in their video thumbnails. As a chronic sceptic, I decided to click on a few to write an article for the readers of the *Oman Observer* on whether the advice given in those videos is worth trying, or if it's plain nonsense. This article is divided into two parts. In the first part, I will describe what's wrong with the basic assumptions. In the second part, I will share my recipe for gathering wealth over time, without necessarily beating the 12-month deadline or aiming for \$1 million specifically. Right off the bat, it's clear that almost all of these YouTubers don't really mean zero as in actual zero. They are mostly shooting their videos in professional studios, with equipment worth thousands of dollars, in the comfort of their beautifully decorated homes. Some have the intellectual honesty to admit that they are not starting from zero. Especially those with a decent following seem to know that they will collect a generous check from YouTube every month. Others are plainly dishonest, ignoring their existing resources as a starting point, but thankfully, they seem to be the minority. Don't get me wrong.

Perils of 'Home Bias' in investing: Investors miss out on returns



DAMIAN HITCHEN
The author is CEO of Saxo Bank MENA



Investors around the world often fall prey to what is known as 'home bias,' a phenomenon where they predominantly invest in domestic stocks. This 'home bias,' while comforting, can be a trap, limiting the potential of their investment portfolios. However, it is important to recognise that investing heavily in local companies can often lead to reduced diversification and can negatively impact both returns and risk at a portfolio level. **Diversification: Beyond borders and sector** A robust investment portfolio is built on diversification across sectors and geographies. Many investors mistakenly believe they're diversified by holding several stocks within their national index. However, this is often insufficient. Even a complete portfolio of local UAE indices may have a skewed risk profile due to limited sectoral breadth. For example, a typical national index may be heavily concentrated in certain sectors, like pharmaceuticals, real estate, or banking, but underrepresented in others, such as technology. This lack of diversification

IT IS IMPORTANT TO RECOGNISE THAT INVESTING HEAVILY IN LOCAL COMPANIES CAN OFTEN LEAD TO REDUCED DIVERSIFICATION AND CAN NEGATIVELY IMPACT BOTH RETURNS AND RISK AT A PORTFOLIO LEVEL.

can also hinder returns. By focusing only on local stocks, investors miss out on global trends and sectors, like the significant growth in technology and digital services. **The illusion of familiarity and changing investment landscape** The preference for national stocks is often justified by perceived familiarity with local companies. However, this can be misleading. While large domestic companies frequently make headlines, investors' understanding of their business models may not be as deep as assumed. In contrast, global brands and services, such as those in technology like Facebook, Netflix or Microsoft, are used daily by most people. Historically, investing in foreign stocks was more challenging and expensive, often requiring manual transactions and incurring higher fees. However, advancements in technology and increasing competition in the financial sector have made global investment more accessible

and cost-effective than ever before. We are fully committed to empowering investors to overcome this "home sickness" and expand their investment horizons, which is why international stocks, especially in the US, can be invested in at very low costs via our platforms. **Building a well-rounded portfolio** Supporting local businesses is commendable, and strong domestic companies should be a part of a diversified portfolio. But they should not constitute the entirety of an investor's holdings. Overconcentration in any one market increases vulnerability to local economic fluctuations and limits exposure to global growth opportunities. Diversification across different geographies and sectors is crucial for mitigating risk and enhancing long-term returns. As the investment landscape evolves, embracing a global perspective in portfolio construction is not just a smart strategy—it's essential for financial success.

Meta surges with record \$196 billion gain in stock market value

NEW YORK: Meta Platforms added \$196 billion in stock market value on Friday, marking the biggest one-day gain by any company in Wall Street history after the Facebook parent declared its first dividend and posted robust results.

Meta's stock surged 20.3 per cent for the session, also recording its biggest one-day percentage increase in a year and its third biggest since its 2012 Wall Street debut. Its stock market value now stands at more than \$1.22 trillion.

Days ahead of Facebook's 20th anniversary, Meta on Thursday authorised an additional \$50 billion in share repurchases and said its quarterly dividend would be 50 cents per share.

While dividends are associated with mature, slow-growth companies, Meta's is the fourth offered by Wall Street's



A woman holds a smartphone with Meta logo in this illustration. — AFP

most valuable technology-related heavyweights, along with Apple, Microsoft and Nvidia.

"Paying a dividend suggests the company wants to reboot its reputation and be taken more seriously. But ultimately the amount being paid is only a token gesture," said Dan Coatsworth, an investment analyst at AJ Bell.

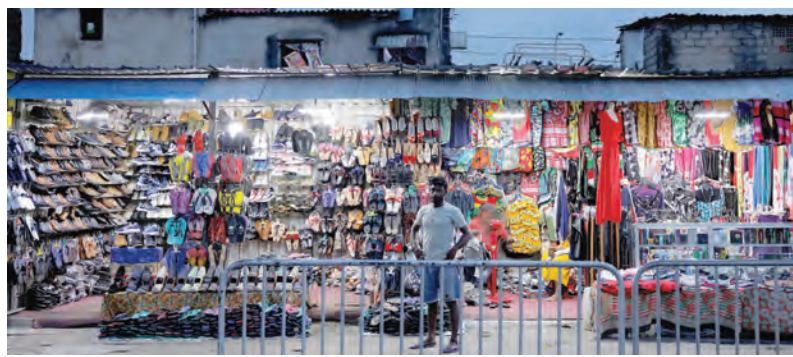
Friday's increase in Meta's market capitalisation eclipsed the previous record held by Amazon which saw its market value surge by \$190 billion on February 4, 2022. — Reuters

Thailand and Sri Lanka sign FTA

COLOMBO: Thailand and Sri Lanka signed a Free Trade Agreement on Saturday, a move Sri Lanka hopes will help it emerge from its worst financial crisis in decades.

The island nation has been renewing a focus on trade deals to foster economic growth and help its battered economy, which is estimated by the World Bank to have contracted 3.8 per cent last year, after a severe foreign exchange crunch plunged it into a wider financial crisis.

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is aimed at enhancing market opportunities, with negotiations covering various aspects such as Trade in Goods,



A vendor waits for customers at a shoe shop in the main market in Colombo, Sri Lanka. — Reuters

Investment, Customs Procedure and Intellectual Property Rights, the short statement added.

A delegation headed by Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin arrived in Colombo on Saturday

to sign the FTA along with other agreements and Thavisin will also attend Sri Lanka's 76th Independence Day celebrations on Sunday.

"This will provide tremendous

Putin signs decree allowing transactions with Russia's Russneft shares

MOSCOW: Russian President Vladimir Putin (pictured) has authorised transactions of shares of Russian oil producer Russneft, according to a decree published on Friday. Glencore previously owned around 24 per cent of Russneft's share

capital. Last September, Russneft said that the Swiss commodities firm had stopped being a shareholder in the oil producer in 2022, without disclosing any details.

The deal may not have been finalised as Russia has steadily tightened exit requirements since

Western companies started leaving soon after Moscow began what it calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine in February 2022.

The new decree will allow Glencore to complete the exit, the Interfax news agency said, citing a source. — Reuters



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ANIMAL LITERATI

British writer Michael Morpurgo poses during a photo session in Paris. Children's author Michael Morpurgo finally has a film adaptation he is happy with in the upcoming "Kensuke's Kingdom". — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

Singer Janelle Monae performs at Coachella Music Festival. Musicians and critics alike have long accused Grammy voters of ignoring the work of female artists — but this year, it's highly probable that women will take home the night's top prizes. — AFP



CULTURE

A ship on fire is pictured during the parade of members of the Up Helly Aa 'Jarl Squad' through the streets of Lerwick, Shetland Islands. — AFP



ART

A woman walks past anti-US graffiti outside the building formerly hosting the embassy of the United States in Tehran — today known as the "Den of Spies" museum. — AFP



TRAVEL

Tourists watch the sunset as they travel in a boat along the Mekong river in Luang Prabang. — AFP

art & life

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Lantern-lit exhibit is a journey to abstract realms and bold visions

Kurian Joshi's solo exhibition, "Lantern - Lighting the Imagination," blends abstract and realistic works — a reflection of the artist's 40-year career in advertising and his deep connection to Oman's culture and landscapes.... P20



Shaddad al Musalmy

Shaddad al Musalmy is a seasoned Omani journalist who worked for top newspapers in the country. He's currently one of Oman Daily Observer's senior editors and contributes across different beats. His commentaries about life in general paints a vivid picture of the changing landscape in Oman.

FOR FEEDBACK, EMAIL THE AUTHOR AT shadadm75@gmail.com

Oman's strategic neutrality is a beacon of peace and mediation

OMAN HAS DISTINGUISHED itself as a peacemaker and mediator, making it a role model for peaceful coexistence with the world. In this regard, Oman's role is crucial, and a simple 'thank you' is insufficient to express appreciation for its tireless

efforts to enhance security and stability in the region, efforts that are respected by all international institutions and organisations. For example, Oman's expertise in promoting dialogue and cooperation among countries stems from the country's friendly policies, which are a result of the strong pillars laid down by its leaders. Oman has been working tirelessly to cultivate good and equal relations with other countries, adopting a policy of good neighbourliness and non-interference in others' internal affairs, and demonstrating respect for international law, conventions, and customs. There is a strong desire among the leadership and the people of Oman to nurture and further strengthen friendships with the people of the world. With this in mind, I extend my gratitude to the people of Oman. Oman's stance and approach to friendship derive from the Late Sultan Qaboos bin Said's vision of Oman as a friend to all, and

His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik has promised to follow the same vision for the promotion of 'peaceful coexistence between nations'. With its firm foundations and principles supporting the rights and justice of the people, and a desire to work together with other peace-loving countries to promote peace and stability, Oman has built a foreign policy that countries around the world admire and respect. As an active member in all international organisations of the United Nations, Oman prioritises respect for international laws and conventions, and supports cooperation between countries and regions. With these unique characteristics, the Omani people hold a special place in the community of nations. During these challenging times when the world is grappling with regional chaos, Oman has taken a commendable stance to play a role in peacemaking among nations. Oman's strategic geographical

location has an impact on linking it with many countries overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. This, in turn, shapes its foreign policy and relations with neighbouring and other countries, reflecting on the safety of navigation and freedom of transit, thereby preserving the security and stability of the region. The visionary leadership of the Late Sultan Qaboos, followed by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, adopting a consistent and cordial approach, has helped Oman establish friendly relations with the entire world, characterised by bonds of friendship. To this date, Oman continues to play a 'constructive' and 'proactive' role in creating a sustainable environment for peace and security in the region. To sum it all, Oman's neutrality is positive and proactive in creating a sustainable environment for peace, security, and stability, allowing the people of the world and future generations to prosper. Till then...

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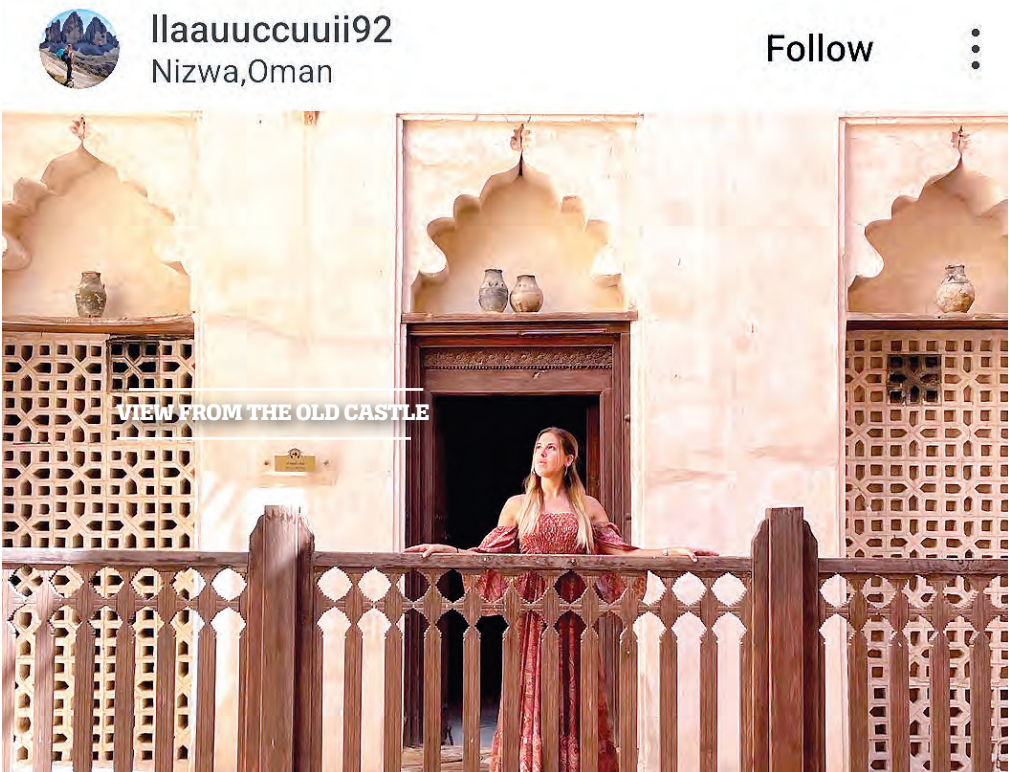
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INSTAGRAM TOP PICKS



3 sumptuous palaces to explore on your Spanish vacation

ONE OF THE MOST important cultural events in Madrid in recent years was the public opening, just before the pandemic, of a collection that had been sitting behind the closed doors of a private palace for about 200 years.

The Palacio de Liria, the grand 18th-century home of the Alba family — among Spain's (and Europe's) oldest and most storied aristocratic families — is set in a tranquil garden just steps from the bustling Plaza de España in central Madrid. Often compared to the Prado Museum and the Royal Palace of Madrid for the masterpieces it contains and the noble residents who lived there, the house is filled with works by

have distinguished themselves in various ways. In the 16th century, the third duke, sometimes called the Iron Duke, was known for his military campaigns in the Eighty Years' War. In the 18th century, the 13th duchess beguiled the painter Goya, who portrayed her several times.

Along the way, the Alba lineage became deeply intertwined with the lineages of other noble families. Titles were amassed. The 18th Duchess of Alba — whose name was Maria de Rosaria Cayetana Paloma Alfonsa Victoria Eugenia Fernanda Teresa Francisca de Paula Lourdes Antonia Josefa Fausta Rita Castor Dorotea Santa Esperanza Fitz-

and continues to be the duke's principal residence, with family cars in the driveway and dogs frolicking on the lawn.

For 15 euros (about \$16.40), visitors get a 65-minute audio tour of 14 glorious rooms, including the library, which houses, among other treasures, the oldest Bible in the Spanish language, a second edition of Cervantes' "Don Quixote" and nearly half of Columbus' extant correspondence — including his hand-drawn maps of Hispaniola from his voyage in 1492.

Beneath a luminous dome, the main staircase leads up to a gallery hung with portraits highlighting the family links to the Stuart

and her father. It is now the coziest and most unpretentious of the three houses — though it does have a bedroom that was used by the former King Juan Carlos I, a family friend, as a teenager.

ALBA DE TORMES

Little remains of the once splendid 16th-century Renaissance palace in Alba de Tormes, where operas and plays premiered for the third duke and his guests, who included King Ferdinand II of Aragon.

Today only a tower with some frescoes can be visited (entrance, 3 euros). A climb to the top offers sweeping views of the gently rolling Castilian plains and the broad,



Titian, Rubens, Velázquez, Goya and other artists favoured by the Spanish court. There are also vast literary and historic archives, as well as letters written from the Americas by explorers Christopher Columbus, Francisco Pizarro and Hernán Cortés.

Since assuming the title in 2014, the 19th duke, Carlos Fitz-James Stuart, through the Casa de Alba Foundation, decided to share his family's treasures with the world — an effort that began in 2015 with the opening of other singular family properties like the Palacio de las Dueñas in Seville and the Palacio de Monterrey in Salamanca. Here is a tour of those three sumptuous palaces, along with a stop in the small town of Alba de Tormes.

FIRST, A LITTLE BACKGROUND

The Duchy of Alba, created in 1472 when King Henry IV of Castile elevated Don García Álvarez de Toledo from count to duke, takes its name from an early family seat in Alba de Tormes, near Salamanca. Over the centuries, the dukes and duchesses of Alba



James Stuart y Silva, Falcó y Gurtubay — had more noble titles (more than 40) than first names. Doña Cayetana, as she was called, was the most titled aristocrat in the world and, until she died in 2014, kept the Alba name in the public eye, mostly by doing and dressing exactly as she pleased, sometimes scandalising an adoring public.

Her eldest son has kept a lower profile and so the three palaces he has opened retain the imprint of his mother's passion for displaying family photos and tiny precious objects, enhancing the sense of home versus museum.

PALACIO DE LIRIA, MADRID

Screened from the street by towering cedars and ancient magnolias, the crisp, colonnaded Baroque facade of Liria can be glimpsed only when one is inside the garden. Designed primarily by architect Ventura Rodríguez in the late 18th century and largely rebuilt in the 20th, according to plans by British architect heavyweight Edwin Lutyens, Liria Palace is the grandest Alba home



monarchs of Britain. An enfilade of connected rooms reveals in astonishing succession the Alba family's rich history as illustrated through a splendid art collection.

PALACIO DE MONTERREY, SALAMANCA

The 16th-century Palacio de Monterrey (9.50 euros for a 50-minute audio tour) illustrates the vicissitudes experienced by many noble dwellings. Its imposing facade suggests a splendid family home, albeit one a fraction of the size it was intended to be as financial constraints meant that only one wing was built. Marriage brought it into the Alba family around 1700.

While not as grand as intended, the facade is among the finest examples of the Spanish Plateresque architectural style, with its carved floral and figural motifs that animate the towers, cornices, windows and entrance.

The palace was used as a school in the 19th century and then left derelict until the interior was restored in the 1940s and '50s by the 18th Duchess of Alba



slow meander of the Tormes River, suggesting what life may have looked like in 1582, when St. Teresa of Ávila, the Carmelite nun, mystic and philosopher, was summoned by the third duchess to bless the birth of their son. Heading the duchess's call despite being ill, St. Teresa died soon after arrival and was buried in Alba de Tormes. Church fathers in Ávila insisted she be interred in her hometown and the body was returned.

However, at the request of a later duchess of Alba, a papal decree was granted for returning the saint to Alba de Tormes, where her body — or what is left of it — remains. On each transfer of her corpse, multiple body parts were taken to satisfy a flourishing market in saints' relics. Her fingers, arms and heart and part of her jaw are all enshrined in far-flung churches. Her tomb in Alba de Tormes draws thousands of faithful visitors every year and requires five separate keys to open it, one of which is owned by the Duke of Alba; another is kept at the Vatican. — NYT



FASHION

The costumes of the very, very rich

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF moon — the first full moon of the new year — also happened to be the last night of the couture, when John Galiano re-created a decaying Paris nightclub in the vaulted caverns beneath Paris' Pont Alexandre III bridge across the Seine.

Creme paper streamers the colour of Madeira wine were draped across walls and dangled from the ceiling amid banged-up wooden bistro chairs and scratched-up tables. Then a shirtless chanteur with a Freddie Mercury moustache rose to croon a love song, a grainy black and white film was reflected in the mirrors and the Maison Margiela show began: a fashion fantasy built on extreme corsetry in which bodies became hourglasses; flesh became a fabric unto itself (and no actual fabric was quite as it seemed); and historical allusions ran in and out like time.

At the end, the audience members were so overwrought they didn't just clap, they stamped their feet hard enough to make the floorboards shake. It has been awhile since anyone had experienced a world-building show quite like it. It looked tortured, in a way that is rarely considered acceptable anymore, and extraordinary at the same time.

Once upon a time such fashion theatre was Galiano's signature. But between the transformation of houses into global brands and his own drug- and alcohol-fuelled anti-semitic self-immolation, exile and penitent return at Margiela, it had begun to seem like a thing of the past. A relic of an earlier age of histrionic self-indulgence of which he was the cautionary tale.

Is it time for reconsideration? Vintage Galiano is having a moment — and this was exactly that. Certainly it was a riposte to the whole idea of comfort clothing, stealth wealth and playing it safe; a masterful demonstration of the couturier's ability to reshape nature in service of a dream and re-create the body modification and control that have become the province of the very rich. (It was striking that Kim Kardashian and

Kylie Jenner, multimillionaires and famous physiques both, were in the front row)

Fashion at this level is its own reality-distortion field. That's something to which the .0001 per cent can relate. For everyone else, it's an anthropology lesson.

THE WEALTHY CONDITION

Couture, with its celebrities and its entrance-making evening wear, has become such a key element of brand marketing — such an eye-catching content generator — that it's easy to forget that these clothes don't just speak to Instagram and TikTok, they also speak to customers, albeit the select few who can afford five- and even six-figure dresses. And for that, the clothes need to have something to say about the wealthy condition. At least something beyond just "look at me."

Yet that is exactly what seems to be missing in the work of the new crop of couturiers, names such as Gaurav Gupta and Robert Wun. They have the showmanship down pat: Gupta with his signature cosmic swirls spiralling up to the Milky Way, Wun with his crystal-rain-drenched film noir vibes. But it's hard to tell if there's anything behind the very elaborate curtain.

Indeed Wun's decision to splatter a draped white cocktail dress and veil in jewelled blood (or blood-red beading) seemed particularly jarring, even if he was telling a Gothic tale, given what else is going on in the world. And the red-skinned alien crawling out of the corseted back of a red ballgown looked — after the bedazzled robot baby at Schiaparelli, not to mention Rick Owens' human backpack collection of 2015 — unfortunately like a gimmick. And a familiar one.

At least Simone Rocha, dipping into couture for the first time as the guest designer for Jean Paul Gaultier, brought her understanding of the power and frustrations of femininity, as well as her subversion of stereotype, to her dialogue with the house, giving the vintage Gaultier-isms gorgeous relevance for the current day. — NYT



Lantern-lit exhibit is a journey to abstract realms and bold visions

BY LAKSHMI KOTHANETH

Kurian Joshi takes you on an artistic journey illuminated by a lantern. Artist Kurian Joshi's solo exhibition, titled 'Lantern – Lighting the Imagination,' is being held at the Art & Soul Gallery in Muscat and will continue until February 10.

The exhibition, inaugurated on January 25, showcases a range of Kurian Joshi's works, reflecting years of creative exploration and genius. The overarching theme is abstract.

"Oman has always inspired me with its culture and landscapes," shared Joshi in a conversation with the *Observer*.

On display are 32 paintings, including two portraits of His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik and the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

"Each portrait took one month to finish. Alongside these, there are paintings tracing my journey from 1992, and there is a new collection," explained Joshi, who extends his passion and artistic skill to the world of advertising.

Although Joshi's career in Oman has predominantly been in advertising and design, he has consistently nurtured the artist within him.

Running until February 10, the exhibition encapsulates a fusion of abstract and realistic paintings. Joshi's works delve into the essence of life and intellectual reflections, predominantly focusing on the theme of Oman.

Kurian Joshi stated, "My creations are intimate records of the resonances I feel within, offering a glimpse into my artistic journey. I invite everyone to share in this experience, and I hope this exhibition provides an exhilarating and enriching experience for all art enthusiasts."

For art lovers, whether the paintings are abstract or realistic, it is his bold brushstrokes that leave an impact.

Kurian Joshi, with over 40 years of experience in the communication industry, began his career in sculpture and clay modelling. He is renowned for his adaptive thinking and eagerness to learn.

Joshi's career path has seen him in different roles, ranging from a creative director, managing advertising for diverse brands, to expertise in cartoons, caricatures, and illustrations.



His other significant roles include working at the India International Trade Fair in New Delhi and serving as an Art Director for National Award-winning Indian film director Bharathan. Additionally, he ran a Design House in India focusing on corporate design. His accolades include the Cresta Merit Award for Sadolin Paints in Advertising and an award for the Oasis Water brand.

